

H. M.

CORVETTE

NICHOLAS MONSARRAT

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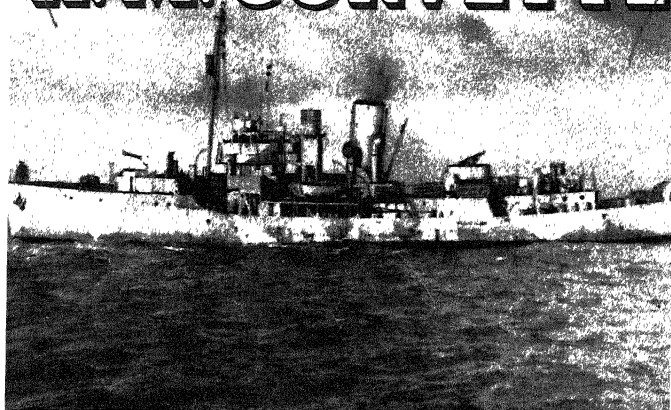
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H. M. CORVETTE

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NICHOLAS MONSARRAT

Lieutenant, R. N. V. R.

J. B. Lippincott Company

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Admiralty S. W. 1.

10th April 1942

Commanding Officer,
H.M.S. "Flower."

I am to inform you that Their Lordships have no objection to the publication by Lieutenant Nicholas Monsarrat, R.N.V.R., of his manuscript "H.M. Corvette" as amended in blue pencil. The manuscript is accordingly returned.

I am to draw attention to King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions Article 17, which directs that material submitted for censorship should be in duplicate.

BY COMMAND OF THEIR LORDSHIPS

Admiralty, S. W. 1.

18th April 1942.

Lieutenant N. Monsarrat, R.N.V.R.,
H.M.S. "Flower."

With reference to your letter of the 4th April, 1942, I am to state that Their Lordships have no objection to your including your own name as author in your book when it is published.

BY COMMAND OF THEIR LORDSHIPS

Two-Minute Alibi

This book is not a masterpiece: I have not had time to write one. It is a collection of notes, jotted down from time to time, of things seen and met with during two years of escorting duty in a corvette. It is sometimes depressing and crude; so is escorting convoys. It is not wholly serious, and there again it follows the job. It contains a lot of "I" because it concerns my ship. I was there at the time, and such coy evasions as "this correspondent" or "the present writer" or "one swears one felt one's sea-boots completely filled with water" seem a very zig-zag course to steer.

Finally, owing to security reasons it is less interesting than it might be. But that, of course, is one of the horrors of war, to be patiently borne by writer and reader alike.

N. M.

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1.

COMMISSIONING

OUR DRAFT-CHIT HAD been endorsed, magnificently, "Report on arrival to Admiral Superintending Contract-built Ships," which conjured up a picture of a penetrating eye and an acre of gold lace on either arm; but after a tour of a small shipyard which, noise for size, must have rated one of the highest in the business, we could not escape the conviction that our No. 1 suits (of warranted superfine pilot cloth), our

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gloves, our correctly slung respirators, our factory-fresh turn-out, was a dangerous waste of elegance. For the place was undeniably dirty, full of such hazards as girders, coils of rusty wire, cranes taking swings at the passers-by, red-hot rivets describing arcs through the air overhead, and bunches of men aiming baulks of oily wood, like battering rams. Now and then there would be a dull splash as a ship was launched—or so it seemed. To preserve that elegance of ours we had continually to draw ourselves aside, like old ladies scandalised in Piccadilly; and, unlike old ladies, often wonderfully immune in the most dubious of situations, sooner or later we were going to be soiled by contact with our surroundings.

“There’ll be no admirals in this joint,” said M. to me. “It’s expecting too much altogether.”

There seemed to be almost everything else: above all, there was a stupefying row going on the whole time, with everyone contributing according to his means: most of it was rivetting,

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but even small boys with nothing else to do would be idly hammering on sheets of iron as they talked. (I daresay they were training for the more responsible jobs: I swear they deserved them.) To make ourselves heard at all we had to shout: and it is foolish (and unhelpful) to shout "What a horrible noise!" so we mostly kept silent and looked about for our quarry.

There was, as we had suspected, no admiral, but instead a helpful works-foreman who directed us to a hut labelled, dauntingly, NAVAL OFFICERS KEEP OUT; and installed there we found an R.N.V.R. officer, with a red face and a square chin, dressed in a working-suit which made us look and feel like the First and Second Dudes in a tastelessly lavish production. He had two stripes to our one, and was in fact the First Lieutenant. After we had announced ourselves he looked us over carefully, from a good many angles: it was difficult to tell which, if any, he liked. (We were both ex-amateur yachtsmen, granted commissions by an Ad-

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miralty Selection Board very likely persuaded to a sense of crucial emergency by Dunkirk.) After a bit the First Lieutenant said: "What can you do?" and after we had told him, he said: "Well, well." He was an Australian, accustomed to herds of dumb animals.

M. and I toured the ship together, as green as grass. Neither of us had seen a corvette before, though there were certainly enough of them about; indeed, it seemed as if, up and down the Clyde, anyone who had ever handled a hammer had set a pole up in his back garden and started building a corvette. Ours was afloat, almost finished, and jammed with workmen. The chief noise was supplied by some last-minute rivetting going on on the after gun-platform, but there were several minor performances of note among the welders, caulkers, joiners, carpenters and plain crash-and-bangers employed on board. We were an hour on our tour, mostly climbing over obstacles and avoiding paintwork, but examining

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every discoverable corner and going over the ground from bridge to magazine and fore-peak to tiller-flat: we liked the look of her, though she was as yet more like an unfinished factory than a ship. Here and there ratings were at work—the advance guard of the crew drafted from barracks, mostly leading-hands testing out their departments: in the W/T cabinet the Leading Telegraphist, caught in a maze of different-coloured wires, was having a cup of tea. M. said: “Getting it all ship-shape?” and the Leading Tel. answered: “No, sir.”

Aft, the Torpedoman was arguing over the depth-charge rails with a welder, a Clydeside dockyard-matey with an accent like a roll of drums. This was my department, and I listened, while M. who was taking over Gunnery Officer went forrard to look at his gun and presently came back nursing a bleeding hand. It seemed he had closed the breech in a new and wrong way.

When we returned to the hut the First Lieutenant said: “Well, what do you think of cor-

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vettes?" I said I liked them. M., a reserved character, said it had all been very interesting. The First Lieutenant said, "I've been in trawlers up to this," and added, "Now you can get busy correcting King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, Part One." The corrections lay in a neat pile of printed booklets, not more than five inches high. Alongside was a pen and two bottles of ink.

Odd sight: Stoker Petty Officer making a sort of doormat bootscraper out of metal beer-bottle tops nailed upside down on a board. He claimed it his own idea, and no hardship to provide for.

We came to know K. R. and A. I. and those interminable corrections, and we came to know that hut, our headquarters for ten days. Until we were formally in commission it was the hub of everything: of checking stores, of ammunitioning, of conferences with dockyard officials, of the formidable amount of paper-

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work—signals, correspondence, watch- and quarter-bills, chart folios—in which we were all soon involved. The crew arrived in drib-lets, more guns arrived by crane and alighted on their mountings like settling sea-gulls. The Chief Engine-Room Artificer arrived and was immediately involved in a technical blizzard over the suction-and-outlet system. The Captain arrived—no, he had been there all the time.

On the ship, progress could be measured by the decreasing amount of noise aboard; soon we were able to enjoy as much as half an hour of tranquillity at a time. Carpets appeared in our cabins, the ward-room lost its carpenter's-shop look and became habitable. A man went round on a float painting in our pendant numbers. A key-board with not less than sixty bunches of keys made its appearance and was, inevitably, put in my charge. The coxs'n, a West-countryman of broad accent, broader beam, and humour broadest of all, emerged as a character, a directive force

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of outstanding value in handling the crew. I liked some of his expressions. "He wears a green coat, sir," he once said of a rating very lively in the mess-decks and very slow at tackling a job of work; and again, less elegantly, of one of the duller seamen, "He's wood from the tool up"; and yet again, "He's very seldom up top"—signifying "He's bald." Bit by bit, the ship's heart moved across from the hut and started beating in the ship itself.

Said the Captain, staring out of the window across the dock, to the First Lieutenant:

"Put the ship in commission at midday to-day."

It was only a matter of saluting while the spotless ensign was hoisted, sending a signalman to the masthead with the commissioning pendant, and mounting an armed sentry on the jetty alongside; but what a difference it seemed to make, that transfer from floating shell to one of His Majesty's ships of war in commission. We walked differently when we were aboard; we sat in the wardroom with a

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sense of formal proprietorship; we even came to resent the dock-workers crowding the decks and strolling about without care or caution. That was no way to treat the ship . . . she was ours now: anyone else was there on sufferance, and no one else mattered.

When I signed the first wine-chit of the commission—"Two Plymouth gins"—I felt as if I were founding a dynasty. As time went by, this turned out to be true.

We broke more new ground, that same day and night, initiating ourselves and the ship into the Navy's apt ceremonial. There was Colours at sunset—hoisting our own Preparative for the benefit of the two other corvettes in the dock-basin, saluting as the bosun's pipe shrilled, dividing the summer evening air, and the ensign came slowly down—all of it was new, and all moving for a score of reasons. And I made the ship's first Rounds the same night, tailing a small procession of the quartermaster, leading hand of the watch, and duty Petty Officer: through the mess-decks

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(crowded, silent, attentive) up on the fo'c'sle-head to look at the shore-wires, after to the galley where some sort of tea-party was in progress (though not after I had left). All that, again, was new, and something one could enjoy for unanalysible reasons, somehow bound up with the compelling phrase "in a seamanlike manner." To write in the Night Rounds book: "2100, Rounds Correct" and initial the entry, was to stand warranty for an orderly and disciplined tribute to tradition.

"0615, Call Officer of the Day.

"0630, Hands fall in. Wash down."

This was the sting in the tail of the First Lieutenant's night orders; it stung me, and after a late session in the wardroom to celebrate commissioning I could have done without it. But duty (and a certain remembered glitter in the First Lieutenant's eye) got me turned out, hurriedly dressed, with such compromises as seaboots for ordinary shoes and a scarf instead of a collar and tie, and put me

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on a cold windswept upper-deck as the fall-in was piped, to stare at a muster of nineteen seamen who stared reproachfully back. Then the duty leading-hand reported the watches correct, the sweepers were told off and hoses rigged, and presently those rather bleak early morning noises, of bristles and squeegees and the gurgle of water in the scuppers and freeing-ports, made themselves heard.

The rating in charge of the hose brought to his job an energy and a scrupulous zeal not always appreciated by the upper-deck sweepers, whose seaboots now and then took the full force of the attack and who were inclined to hurry the job and get below to the comparative holiday known as "squaring off mess-decks and flats." I dodged the main stream and went aft to the galley, where the Leading Cook was heating up a good quart of dripping-fat in a saucepan and the wardroom steward making a brew of tea, from which I claimed a hand-out. The Stoker Petty Officer of the morning watch came up the ladder, took six

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puffs at a cigarette, crushed it out against the depth-charge rails, and went below again, followed by the black cat which had already attached itself to the ship; with the obvious promise of more to come. Ashore, a trickle of workers was coming through the dock-gates, some of them making for our gangway where the sentry, counting aloud, was practising his own stylised version of "Présent Arms." The cold haze which had overhung the dock-basin when I first came up was already beginning to disappear.

I waved to the Sub. on the neighbouring corvette, and he answered with a semaphore message of which I could only read the first word—"What." I repeated it back, and there, in frustrated confusion, the matter rested. . . . When, from forrard, I heard "Cooks to the Galley" being piped, I went below to shave and finish dressing, and make myself fit to see Colours hoisted at eight.

A second gigantic assortment of charts was delivered shortly before we sailed. At the top

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of the box was the "Arctic Pilot" and underneath a chart of the navigable parts of the Danube. Said the Leading Signaller, looking over my shoulder as I unpacked the consignment:

"Seems like we're going to get some variety, sir. I could just do with a slice of Old Vienna."

"Pipe 'Stations for Leaving Harbour' in five minutes," said the First Lieutenant to the quartermaster; and to me he added: "You take the after-part, and if you get a wire round the screw, God help you."

My foreboding that only with God's help would I avoid turning the screw into something like one of those old-fashioned frame-aerials was not borne out, probably because the leading-hand of the after-party was a leading-seaman of extreme competence, clearly accustomed to the code of whistle-blasts and mystical signs which came in a steady flow from the bridge. It was he who translated into action the first technical obscurity, "Single up to the breast and spring!"—i.e., let go all

ropes except a single breast-rope and a single rope running from aft to a shore-bollard about amidships; without him I might have plunged about for hours and still guessed wrong. (Hitherto, in my experience, one had simply said "About time to cast off" and suited the action to the word, fending off the jetty with one's leg.) Judging from the uproar forrard, M. was having trouble with the windlass, which gave me time to reel some of the spare wire out of the way, before the next manœuvre.

We needed a tug at each end to get us out of the dock-basin and into the stream, and it took us some time to hook on to ours, the heaving line being brand-new and the seaman in charge of it a painstaking worker who was not going to be flurried by a mistake or two. The deep silence from the bridge which attended our efforts made an effective commentary. . . . But presently the tow was secure, and we were out in the narrow tributary stream which ran into the Clyde—a stream lined with dockyard workers from our own and other

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yards, who had left their jobs to give us a cheer and a wave as we passed. It was their last moment, and our first; I wished I could go up on the bridge to get the full savour of it, but my job was aft, in case we had for any reason to cast off the tow. So down stream we went, slowly and evenly, not yet in our own element or under our own power, but setting out on our journey none the less: a Clyde-built ship leaving the Clyde, with her builders watching her and wishing her God-speed.

I had time to watch my after-party at work, and to like the way they got down to it. About half the crew were Active Service—i.e. regulars, and the rest were Hostilities Only ratings, or, as the coxs'n called them, with more humour than truth, Hostile Ordinary Seamen. But whatever their background—and the H.O.'s ranged from van-boy to statistical accountant—they buckled to their new job with admirable keenness. I think that all of us, officers and men alike, felt the same about the ship: that she was something between a brand-

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new boy and a—well, almost a sacred charge, a unit whose reputation had to be made and whose laurels won. We had to work, from now on, to get going, to tune up, to perfect the fighting instrument that had been given us: she was a good ship, a grand ship—corvettes *are* attractive and workmanlike—but we had to deserve her, and that meant hard work. The Clyde had done its famous best for us: from now on the charge was ours.

There is a process known as “signing for the ship.” It is one of the higher mysteries, conducted behind drawn curtains, but roughly speaking it happens after full-power trials, the working of the windlass, and the firing of every gun and depth-charge thrower carried, and is a contest between the contractors, who say everything is marvellous, and the Captain, who has a list a mile long of defects and shortcomings he wants put right before he will finally take the ship over. As can be imagined, it may be a very tense occasion indeed.

But when it is concluded, as sometime it

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must be, all is love again, and double gins. And soon after, the first sailing-orders arrive; they are endorsed "SECRET" and begin: "Being in all respects ready for sea, H.M.S. *Flower* will proceed . . ."

2.

WORKING UP

I SHARED THE MORNING watch (4 to 8) on the passage to our base with the First Lieutenant, after keeping the first watch (8 to midnight) as well. In these early days, we worked watch-and-watch about, until the two children (M. and I) could be trusted with weapons of war. Later, of course, we were in three watches, of which I kept the Middle (midnight to 4 A.M.) for seventeen months. To be perfectly frank, this was not

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the hardship it may sound; in fact I preferred this arrangement, for the main reason that I was left alone unless (or until) all hell broke loose, and could run the watch as I liked, without interference and in peace: the Captain was turned in, in his sea-cabin, the First Lieutenant did not relieve me till four, and I was free of the odd assortment of visitors who were inclined to crowd the bridge at other times. (*I hate* being watched or supervised, when I am doing my best and making no mistakes.) But all those personal problems and arrangements, of course, were still to come, on that first night at sea.

The log-entries when we took over at four o'clock read:

“WIND: Direction 270, Force 2-3.

WEATHER AND VISIBILITY: bc 7.

SEA & SWELL: 21

CORRECTED BAROMETRIC PRES-
SURE IN MILLIBARS: 1002.”

all of which is the dull sea-language for a lovely night. We had passed an inward-bound

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convoy in the first watch, before the moon got up, being challenged out of complete blackness by a very wide-awake destroyer; but now it was clearer, with a smudge of land just visible, and the ship progressed steadily, finding her easy speed, having nothing to deal with as regards weather but behaving admirably under helm and promising a ready and able performance in the future. From the wing of the bridge I could distinguish the hard outline of the fo'c'sle-head, the sky cut by the mast and fore-stay, the line of foam at the bow; beyond was a brilliant spread of moonlit water, silver on black, and beyond that the ring of darkness, retreating before us, closing in astern. The group-flashing light we had picked up half an hour earlier was just coming abeam, and fine on the bow a cluster of lights low in the water marked a line of fishing boats working the inshore tide. I reckoned we could just about pass them without altering course, though I didn't suppose I should have any say in the matter.

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From the other wing of the bridge came the First Lieutenant's voice.

"I'm going inside to log that light and have a smoke. Sing out if you see anything."

He disappeared inside the compass-house, and I had the ship and the watch to myself.

I moved across to the centre of the bridge, stirred to an odd exhilaration. Behind me a faint—a very faint—glow from the screened binnacle showed the face of the Asdic rating, intent and serious; at my side the signalman of the watch was fiddling with his Aldis-lamp; and out on the bridge-sponsons the two look-outs stared ahead, the pointed capes of their duffle-coats in sharp outline against the sky. Centred thus, with fifty-odd men sleeping between decks, with the whole ship entrusted to me as a kind of intricate going concern, I felt tremendously responsible, and tremendously alert too. She was all mine: from this nerve-centre on the bridge—myself—could go out a pulse that would be felt from end to end of the ship: she would respond to it, she would

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do what I told her, she would move at my word. Magic moment of authority! Quite possessed by the idea, prompted to pure foolishness by this novelty of power, I bent to the voice-pipe:

“Port ten.”

From below came the quartermaster’s answering voice: “Port ten, sir.” And then: “Ten of port wheel on, sir.”

“Midships.”

“Midships. . . . Wheel’s amidships, sir.”

“Steady.”

“Steady. . . . Course South eighty West, sir.”

“Very good.” I waited perhaps twenty seconds. “Starboard ten. Steer North eighty-five West.”

“Steer North eight-five West, sir.”

The First Lieutenant made himself heard from behind the chart-table screen: “What’s going on out there?”

“We passed a floating log,” I called back, feeling slightly silly. “It looked too big to hit.”

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A vague grumble indicated that the explanation passed muster. Only the starboard lookout, peering over the dodger at virgin sea, seemed to betray an injured incredulity. No logs, big or small, had got past *him*.

Up another voice-pipe came the Captain's voice:

"Fore-bridge!"

"Bridge, sir."

"Who's that?"

"Monsarrat, sir."

"Where's the First Lieutenant?"

"Just looking at the chart, sir."

"M'm . . . how far have we got?"

I gave the last light abeam, and the time.

"M'm . . . see anything?"

"The next light just looming, sir: the bearing's all right. Ship to port, going our way. Some fishing boats inshore."

"Quite a party." And then, surprisingly:
"Feel all right up there?"

"Yes, sir."

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"Very good. Tell the bosun's-mate to call me at a quarter to eight."

"Aye, aye, sir." Below, the voice-pipe cover clicked shut, cutting me off. Of such small exchanges, lit with sudden humanity, is homage born.

It grew lighter. The best thing about the morning watch, this, the thing one looked forward to from four o'clock onwards, the thing I was to miss greatly in the middle watch later on: dawn coming up, ships in station, and all secure. . . . There is at sea a certain swift change from moonlight to dawnlight that is very easily recognisable; at one moment, it seems, the water is silvery, glowing, with each breaking wave throwing off a small wash of phosphorescence, and then when next you look it has taken on a livid hue, a cold dull grey which is the day's first signal. The ship's outlines fill in suddenly, and all the bridge-personnel become figures and faces instead of shadows—grey, tired faces, mostly, but welcome for their return to normality. Then up

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comes the sun, to complete the colour-process and dry off the damp shoulders of your duffle-coat; and up comes tea, with the steward foraging for the cups and plates of the night's picnic; and lastly up comes your relief, which is best of all.

You've earned your breakfast, and it's those lovely soured herrings again.

We arrived at our destination.

"What a grand place," M. said to me as soon as we were moored. "It's a pity we've got to work."

Work we did. Daily we exercised everything, with a wild sense of crisis. We abandoned ship, we repelled boarders, we got out the kedge-anchor (an intolerable operation, this), we closed up action-stations against the stop-watch, we fought fires, we prepared to tow, we put an armed landing-party ashore amid a hurricane of cheers. There was even a suggestion, happily suppressed, that we should exercise the Confidential Books, throwing them overboard to see if they sank, in accord-

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ance with the regulations. . . . We fired guns and signalled, and took soundings, we demolished the target at gun-practice, but on the other hand we made a supreme hash of our first depth-charge drill, due to a fault in the electric buzzer-system. ("Really, sir, you don't know whether to laugh or cry," murmured the Cox's'n to me, as we surveyed one thrower-crew awaiting the order to fire, and another arguing the toss as to whether two rings meant "Fire" or "Fall out.") But we learnt quickly during those weeks; almost before we knew it had happened, we emerged as a ship's company instead of a crowd of individuals, we took shape as a disciplined force with a routine, practised and practised again, for any and every eventuality. It was hard work, and we wasted no time: but we could see the results from day to day, and they were encouraging in every particular.

Our first defaulter.

"Halt! Left turn! Off caps! Ordinary Seaman Jones, sir: one, was absent over leave

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two-and-a-half hours, two, did return on board drunk, three, did create vandalism in the mess-decks."

"What—er—vandalism was this, coxs'n?"

"Broke up a mess-stool, sir, and tried to light the stove with it."

"What have you got to say, Jones?"

"Had a few drinks, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Serious offences, all these. And you made a nuisance of yourself, too, keeping a lot of people awake. First Lieutenant's report."

"First Lieutenant's report. On caps! Right turn! Quick march!"

"Spoilt our record, coxs'n."

"Got to go some time, sir. Human nature."

Sunday morning brought us Divisions on the fo'c'sle, the only space large enough to accommodate the whole ship's company; and a very smart turn-out it was, too, the two ranks facing inboard, the wind stirring the seamen's collars and ruffling our hair as we stood bare-

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headed for prayers. And afterwards came the Captain's Rounds, a most thorough progress through every part of the ship, which looked (on that occasion) like a millionaire's yacht—and a millionaire with an inquisitive eye and a passion for spit-and-polish.

Later in the morning I attended "Up Spirits," though the sight of the rum going down, tot by tot, was tantalising to a degree. And then "Pipe down" was sounded, and a true Sunday calm fell on the ship: we lay to our moorings in shelter and warm sun, and revelled in our hard-won peace.

Alas, to have one's afternoon nap interrupted by the ominous words:

"Leading-Seaman Black, sir, reports the loss of a salt fish, and wishes to state a complaint."

This is going to be a long one.

We went out on exercises with a submarine, but all that, save for one innocent oddment, must be shrouded in mystery. The oddment is this. To help an inexperienced ship, and to

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their hands fingering the wheel-spokes like harp players reading an intricate score.

The minute wardroom, with everything neatly clipped into place, was no more than a passageway from one end of the boat to the other; and the cramped space made for a recognisable comradeship between officers and men, of special value when one man's mistake might mean disaster for all of them. But one could not help being struck by the adroitness and marked competence of every one aboard; when the klaxon sounded for diving stations nothing much seemed to happen, and yet, when one looked round the control-room, every lever and wheel and knob had been closed up, by a crew which slipped into place like pieces of the same machinery.

Only when the order "Periscope depth!" was given, preparatory to surfacing, was a slight sense of crisis to be observed: it was conceivable that a blunder might be made and one or other of the hunting craft would be in the way: one could feel a certain tenseness in

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had a day out in the submarine before we left.

All of it was interesting, and unexpected too. I thought I would be conscious of being under water, and possibly nervous—indeed, at the very beginning I had been mortally afraid of turning claustrophobic, and possibly disgracing myself; but at no time was it possible to realise that we *were* submerged. The occasional noise of the hunting corvettes, sounding oddly like goods trains, passing overhead, was the only indication that we were under water: otherwise (save for the cramped space) it was no different from being, say, in the forrard mess-deck of a corvette. And it was all amazingly quiet: there was no vibration and no engine noise, and orders were given almost in a whisper, instead of the wind-quelling shout one had to use on our own bridge. It had been rough up top before we dived, but down here there was a deep peace: nothing threatened, no one stirred save the two men at the hydroplane controls, their eyes on the depth gauges,

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their hands fingering the wheel-spokes like harp players reading an intricate score.

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each person—the Officer-of-the-watch staring at his gauges, the crew with their hands ready on the Kingston-valve levers, the Captain (a young lieutenant) gripping the periscope training gear. Then the periscope broke the surface, and the Captain, suddenly relaxing, gave an order over his shoulder and climbed up to the conning-tower; and presently, touched by a breath of fresh air, I looked up, and there above us was a square of blue sky.

It is, perhaps, worth remarking that, with my eyes on the future, I noted that the view through the periscope of the surrounding surface craft was distressingly sharp and clear.

It was the energetic habit of the Senior Officer of the base to put out in a fast motor-launch directly after lunch, and, choosing his victim, approach at speed on the blind side of the ship, in the hope of catching the Officer-of-the-day off his guard or the Captain literally napping. As he was almost a professional Angry Man, it is good to be able to relate that,

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thanks to luck and a reliable series of quartermasters, we were never caught out.

Our "passing-out" day at the end of our working-up period also went off without mishap, though there was one moment, when the order "Pressure on the fire-hoses!" produced a trickle that would not have quelled a daisy, when the situation looked dynamic. But it passed: we were officially congratulated on the day's performance; and the same evening a bunch of reports, on the ship and on each officer, made their appearance. They were rather like school-reports, and induced the same expectant nervousness.

The Captain came off best, then the First Lieutenant, then M., then I. Some sort of coincidence, no doubt.

Off again, nearer the war and our job; at anchor, awaiting sailing orders.

Off a nearby shoal, with her mast and one funnel showing above water, there lay a sunk destroyer full of dead Frenchmen. Her story had been one of the brief horrors of the war:

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an explosion aboard had been followed by a fire, and the ship gradually became one vast incandescent torch. Now she lay there, a rusty, weed-washed charnel-house, marked by a green wreck-buoy; and many times later, as we came up the river at dusk and drew nearer that green winking eye, I would project my mind below the surface of the water, and try to picture the horror's details, and what it was our anchor saw as it shattered the still water and plunged below. Indeed, I could not help this imagining, which always persisted long after we had swung and settled to our anchor: the mast proclaimed an ugly angle in the near-darkness, the green eye accused me—"You are alive," it said. "We are dead, very dead—charred, swollen, abandoned—and there are scores of us within a few hundred feet of you." It was the other side of the medal, frightful in its detail, final in its implication. It was not the R.N.V.R., it was our introduction to war.

I came aboard the last liberty-boat after a

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spell ashore, and went down to the wardroom, where M. was correcting charts.

"Our orders have come," he said. "We're off tomorrow morning."

"What are we getting?" I asked. "Iceland? Alexandria? Or some nice soft job, defending a pier in North Wales?"

"None of these. Convoy escort, North Atlantic."

"Oh . . ." I picked up the wine chit-book. "What are all these double gins?"

He smiled. "Convoy escort, North Atlantic. And winter coming on."

3.

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A CORVETTE WOULD
roll on wet grass.

Our measure of rough weather is domestic, but reliable. Moderate sea, the lavatory-seat falls down when it is left tipped up; rough sea, the radio-set tumbles off its bracket in the wardroom.

Some trips are good, some not. There was one, in calm weather, with an easy-going Gibraltar convoy, that was a picnic, the kind of

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jaunt which costs a guinea a day, with fancy-dress thrown in, in peace time: there was another, that took us far North and West, that was a long nightmare. For when, seven days out, we turned round to go home, an easterly gale set in: five hundred miles in the teeth of it we went before it moderated—five hundred miles, and six days, of screaming wind and massed tumbling water, of sleet and snow-storms, of a sort of frozen malice in the weather which refused us all progress. Nothing could keep it out: helmets, mittens, duffle-coats, sea-boot stockings—all were like so much tissue paper. “Cold?” said the signalman, when he pulled his hand away from the morse-lamp and left a patch of skin on the handle: “Cold? I reckon this would freeze the ears off a brass monkey.”

There are cumulative miseries to be endured during a really wet night on the bridge: icy water finds its way everywhere—neck, wrists, trouser-legs, boots; one stands out there like a sodden automaton, ducking behind the rail as

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every other wave sends spray flying over the compass-house, and then standing up to face, with eyes that feel raw and salt-caked and streaming, the wind and the rain and the treachery of the sea. Of course, heavy weather need not always make life so miserable: if corvettes are in no hurry, and can afford to ease down and lie-to with their bows just off the wind, they do very well—as far as that's concerned, they are prime sea-boats; but if they have to proceed with any determination, they put their nose smack into it every time. Twice we have had windows smashed up on the bridge by seas which curled up and broke right on top of them: surprise-packets we could have done without. Of course we're not complaining, just remarking on the facts. . . .

Cheerful dialogue on being called for the middle watch, rough weather.

“Is it raining?”

“No, sir—just washing over.”

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' Midnight means taking it all on again: mounting the ladder with an effort, watching for the square of sky (sometimes scarcely perceptible) which will tell you what the visibility is going to be like: listening to see if it is still blowing as hard as when you were last on watch. It usually is.

Apart from the noise it produces, rolling has a maddening rhythm that is one of the minor tortures of rough weather. It never stops or misses a beat, it cannot be escaped anywhere. If you go through a doorway, it hits you hard: if you sit down, you fall over: you get hurt, knocked about continuously, and it makes for extreme and childish anger. When you drink, the liquid rises towards you and slops over: at meals, the food spills off your plate, the cutlery will not stay in place. Things roll about and bang, and slide away crazily: and then come back and *hurt* you again. The wind doesn't howl, it *screams* at you, and tears at your clothes, and throws you against things

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and drives your breath down your throat again. And off watch, below, there is no peace: only noise, furniture adrift, clothes and boots sculling about on the deck, a wet and dirty chaos. Even one's cabin can be a vicious cage, full of sly tricks and booby-traps; not a refuge at all, rather a more subtle danger-spot, catching you relaxed and unawares and too dead-tired to guard your balance.

Sometimes, at the worst height of a gale, you may be hove-to in this sort of fury for days on end, and all the time you can't forget that you are no nearer shelter than you were twenty-four hours before; you are gaining nothing, simply holding your own: the normal rigours of the trip are still piled up, mountains high, in front of you.

A most unholy chaos can be caused on the upper deck when, in bad weather, things get adrift and are not immediately secured. We once had some heavy oil drums which broke away aft, and were washing about with a tremendous noise, dragging all sorts of oddments

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—planks, fenders, heaving-lines—in their train; to get them under control again we had almost to stalk them, dodging out of the way as they crashed to leeward, gradually getting more and more ropes secured and finally smothering them. And another time, a rough, pitch-dark night, one of the boats which was swung out rolled itself right under water, smashing the griping-spar and jumping its releasing gear at one end: it hung down by the after falls, its bows in the water at one moment and then lifting and crashing against the ship's side as we rolled. It looked, and sounded, nasty.

“Have a crack at securing that,” said the Captain, after watching it for a couple of minutes. “But don’t kill yourself. If it’s no good, cut it adrift.”

The right order. . . . It took an hour, and the six toughest hands of the watch, but we got it inboard in the end, not much the worse for wear, and securely lashed in its chocks. I think I almost enjoyed that struggle, flounder-

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ing about on the boat-deck with the seas washing over, leaning outboard at the end of a lifeline to try and get the falls hooked on again. It was nearer the sea-going of the past, less official, less organised, less warlike.

Discussion on the bridge, at the height of a gale, of how we came to be drafted to corvettes.

Captain: "I was told it would be like luxury motoring."

Self: "I was told I was damned lucky to get one."

Voice of Asdic rating: "I was detailed off, sir."

When the ship crosses the storm-centre, there comes a sudden lull, and then the wind starts to blow from the opposite direction, setting up a baffling sea. It seems to come at you from all angles, rather like the meeting of the tides in Pentland Firth at the top of Scotland: shapeless humps of water are thrown together crazily, and when the wave-tops break

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they are caught and blown back like a horse's mane, or a crest of white hair suddenly whipped up.

Running with a heavy following sea at night has its own hard-won loveliness. The long streaks of foam are lit eerily by the moonlight: the enormous pile-up of water which collects, hissing and roaring, under the bow, seems suddenly to explode into a broad phosphorescent smother which in a moment is left behind. Looking aft, one sees the stern cant up before a black wall of water: the water overtakes, slides underneath and past, and breaks at the bow, its attack spent. The ship yaws, the compass swings: from below comes the quartermaster's muttered curse as he braces his feet and hauls the wheel over to meet the next ponderous weight of sea.

Simile-spinning in the middle watch.

Northern lights—like giant streamers stirred by a sky-wide fan: like an amateur-operatic

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rendering of Don Giovanni's purgatory: like the fake flames of a pale electric fan. . . .

"Bosun's mate!"

"Bosun's mate, sir."

"Get me a cup of tea, and the notebook in my top drawer."

It is pleasant to notice the first patch of drying deck after a storm. It spreads. It means peace. But it covers, between decks, a chaos which until then there has been no chance to set to rights. In the mess-decks, water is everywhere; there are benches broken, things washing about on the deck, off-watch stokers trying to sleep and cursing the sweepers at work cleaning up. The wardroom is like an abandoned battlefield: armchairs have slipped their moorings and crashed the whole length of it, packed bookcases have burst open, and in the pantry all the steward's cunning has not prevented a formidable expense of crockery.

There's a respite now, anyway: hot meals again, instead of tea and corned-beef sand-

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wiches; sleep without being tipped out of your bunk, a whole watch without once getting wet. The upper-deck Petty Officer gets to work squaring up, the seaman-gunner of the watch cleans the Lewis and Hotchkiss guns, the Leading Signalman checks over his rockets and flares, the Torpedoman greases the depth-charge releasing-gear, examines all the primers, tests the electric circuits. Work comes as a relief, after the discomfort and the cramping inactivity of the past few days.

In the calm darkness, there sounds the beat of an unseen bird's wings, flailing the water as it evades the ship. We seem to be moving through a bath of phosphorescence; our bow-wave can be seen, streaming away into the darkness on either side, and ships in company, even half a mile away, have a luminous line from stem to stern along their waterline.

When you are in convoy, station-keeping at night becomes an endurance test, a matter of staring without respite, concentrating on a

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little blurred image far ahead or abeam which may be the right ship—or a smudge on one's binoculars. If, in poor visibility, a zigzag is ordered, it has to be worked out on time instead of on distance, and becomes a sort of qualified guesswork: you run the outward course for so many minutes, until the convoy is right out of sight, and then you turn and run back till you meet them again; the whole manœuvre is a recurrent act of faith.

There is tremendous difficulty, sometimes, in hanging on for four hours to a ship which seems to fade devilishly to nothing if you relax for a moment; but the difficulty gradually lessens and is at last forgotten, if you are lucky, in the joys of the morning watch, with the light coming up and showing the convoy still there, still in formation, still ploughing on, and one day nearer delivery. And there is a certain satisfaction, too, in rounding up stragglers, shepherding them, grading your signals between "Can you squeeze a few more revs?"

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and a forthright "Keep better station in future."

But on the whole the compensations of watch-keeping at night are few, and tremendously realised: the comfort of a small wavering stern-light, of a big ship easily seen and recognised, of a duffle-coat, of a cup of near-solid cocoa halfway through the watch. They are the things you count on and cling to, the things that seem to be on your side against the enemy. You grow, almost, to love them.

A ship may be so blurred by darkness and rain that its outline, even close to, is no more than a dubious smudge in the gloom; and that is what you have to hold on to for four long hours, under orders to remain at an exact bearing and distance from it. And all that time the weather can best be summed up in the cox'n's phrase: "Dark, sir? You couldn't see a new sixpence on a sweep's arse."

There is something completely satisfying in the attention, the loving care even, that one

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can give to a watch, especially at night: keeping an all-round, all-time lookout, keeping mathematical station and a fast wide-angle zig-zag, doing your very best for four hours and handing over the watch as if it were a neatly secured and damned-shipshape package.

Sometimes, even when there is nothing doing, the Captain comes up in the middle watch; saying nothing at first, noticing everything, and then perhaps settling down to talk, with relays of tea at intervals to sweeten the session. (Some watches, indeed, are so boring that a cup of tea is an event, a banging door a relief from flat monotony.) The cox's'n also is an occasional visitor, usually introducing himself with a bar of chocolate or some home-made titbit from the Petty Officers' mess; perhaps to season his advice, discreetly and often very indirectly tendered.

In default of visitors or emergencies, one talks to the duty signalman—a different one every night. The talk ranges widely, most of it concerned with the future, some of it (as is

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natural at 3 A.M.) highly pessimistic. I remember one such discussion, of what it would be like after the war, where we would live and what jobs we would go for. The signalman favoured a country pub, with just enough custom to keep things going. . . . But the talk had, as usual, a nostalgic air about it—it was dependent on so many things, so many chances of fortune, so many hazards: it might even stand or fall by something that was going to happen in the next five minutes. . . . Even to use the phrase “after the war” took for granted the twin unmentionable doubts, of victory and of personal survival.

Strain and tiredness at sea induce a sort of hypnosis: you seem to be moving in a bad dream, pursued not by terrors but by an intolerable routine. You come off watch at midnight, soaked, twitching, your eyes raw with the wind and with staring at shadows; you brew a cup of tea in the wardroom pantry and strip off the top layer of sodden clothes; you

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do, say, an hour's intricate cyphering, and thereafter snatch a few hours' sleep between wet blankets, with the inflated lifebelt in your ribs reminding you all the time that things happen quickly; and then, every night for seventeen nights on end, you're woken up at ten to four by the bosun's mate, and you stare at the deck-hand and think: My God, I *can't* go up there again in the dark and filthy rain, and stand another four hours of it. But you can, of course; it becomes automatic in the end. And besides, there are people watching you.

But when you are working in three watches, and have eight hours off at a time, there is luxury in coming off watch: the luxury of relaxing, smoking, putting on bedroom slippers, turning on the electric heater and feeling your face thawing and losing its stiffness: all with no sense of hurry. It can be comforting below: one *can* forget all the menaces outside. So far, I have been lucky in having had only one acute attack of nerves—lying down, strained, alert,

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unable to sleep, just waiting for it: waiting for those shouts, that rush of water, that iron clang. . . . But that was in the middle of a rough party, when another escort-vessel had been sunk, and I don't imagine I was alone. I hope not, anyway.

There is a steady deterioration of food during trips; we have had five days or so of comparative comfort, and then beans set in, and corned beef, and tinned sausages, and biscuits ominously labelled with the name of a firm which, in peace time, was famous among dog-lovers the world over.

"Steward, is this bread fresh?"

"No, sir—reconstructed."

Satisfaction, after a ten days' outward battle, of once more giving helm-orders with "East" in them. .

As with convoys, so with watches: they can be specially good, as well as specially bad.

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The first landfall of the return journey makes one of the best—it is comforting to meet the friendship of coast-lights again, to be (as they say) under the Fighter Umbrella, to be on the map and an ascertainable spot on it too, instead of staring eternally at stars and the last ship of the wing column and anonymous unidentifiable water. Besides, the watch goes quickly: there are lights to be picked up and checked, bearings to be taken, little sums in Four-Points and Running Fixes to be added up; possibly the convoy alters its formation, and there is some chivvying to be done. One is at work as a sailor instead of as a pair of bored eyes. And above all, it means that there will not be many more watches; another day of it, thirty-six hours perhaps, and one will be tied up to something solid and enjoying sleep without a miserly limit to it.

Near land, the porpoises and the seagulls play round the bows, giving us the first welcome. The seagulls have a trick of skimming round the bows close to the water, ready to

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plane upwards if there is a second player coming the other way. Human beings need four sets of traffic lights and slavish obedience thereto, to do this in safety.

Now and then there comes a quiet sunny afternoon watch, with the Captain and all other officers turned in below, with nothing for me to do but take one Meridian Altitude sight and see that the quartermaster keeps his course, with the signalman washing out an ensign in a bucket of suds. And sometimes it is a prelude to a whole row of luxuries within a few hours: tying up to the oiler and ringing off engines: the silence and peace which descends on the ship when the mail comes over the side and is distributed: the first night in port, the first drink, first undressing, first sleep.

At our usual base, there is one small dock, nicknamed "The Garage," that has become Corvette Headquarters. At the end of a convoy it is crammed with ships; and this recurrent association, and the chance of exchanging

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visits, is remarkably pleasant, particularly at the end of a trip which may have been rough in one way or another. The various visiting captains usually forgather in the C.O.'s cabin; down in the wardroom some moderate junketing sets in; it is good to relax, and tell competitive lies about the one that got away.

Of course, this lotus-eating doesn't last forever: the mail will have brought enough paperwork to last a dozen good men a fortnight. Reports, as long as your arm, are called for if a ship has had as much as a queer look from a porpoise; and internal peace in the dock is very likely shattered by a snooty blast from the Senior Officer about jetty-sentries, or about the Guard Corvette being responsible for cleaning up the very nasty rubbish-dump left by the preceding escort-group. But while quiet reigns, it is just what we want. We're possibly going out again in a matter of hours, anyway.

Snow in the nagivation-lights going down

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river: driving past the bridge, glowing green or red for an instant and then disappearing.

More satisfying to the lover of nature than to the Navigating Officer.

Rounding up a big convoy and getting it into shape, particularly in bad weather, can be hard work, and doubly so if you are canteen-boat—i.e. the junior corvette, detailed for all the odd jobs.

There has come to be, among merchant ships, a very high standard of convoy discipline, and the greater part of the “forming up” can safely be left to them; but even so there are always plenty of oddments to attend to. You may be sent up and down the lines counting heads. You may be detailed to close one of the ships and give him last-minute instructions on the loud-hailer—and he is invariably a foreigner with neither English nor megaphone. You may be sent to chivvy an outlying straggler. And all the time you are getting a steady trickle of signals from the Senior Officer

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—“Tell the fourth tanker to fly his pendants”
—“Find out where that little one is straying to”—“Has So-and-so dropped his pilot?”—
“So-and-so reports steering defect: close and investigate.” Sometimes, from the upper deck of a bigger ship, you see a long line of khaki or Air Force blue, faces staring down, hands waving, and you know you’ve got something even more worth escorting than usual.

Incensed by some free-style manœuvring on the part of his charges, the Commodore hoisted the signal for “Manœuvre badly executed”: the hoist was repeated (no doubt with full hearts) by all the other ships in convoy, with the exception of a half-a-dozen confirmed stragglers and wanderers in the rear, whose hoists were incorrect and signified instead “Manœuvre well executed . . .” I should like to think they did it on purpose.

The last sight of land impresses the mind

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as much as the first landfall of the homeward journey.

The convoy is now in shape, the escorts correctly stationed; each ship knows its proper position, its opposite number, the amount of room it has to play with: all we now have to do, every ship in company, is to stay in station, make no smoke, keep on going, turn the right corners, and make our number prettily on arrival. . . . We're on the job once more, and it's a job we know and (I suppose) like; and when one looks about and sees the faint line of land, our last contact with the normal world, slipping away on the quarter, and the convoy proceeding as an orderly unit on a journey wherein it must make its own tracks and meet such emergencies as come its way, one is aware of the moment as a memorable and significant one.

By now there is probably no ship in company that does not know of these emergencies at first hand, and will acquit itself in seaman-like fashion if any of them arise; but for good

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or ill we are on our way, for the n th time challenging the sea and the malice of the enemy: the convoy to make the journey against all hazards, and we to see that it does not fail for want of a show of teeth. When land fades astern, the party is on once again, the ring is formed.

There is a certain comradely pleasure in meeting an aircraft on long-range reconnaissance. A wide-awake lookout picks it up, the signalman of the watch challenges and is answered: and then it flies past, sometimes quite close, giving little dips of its wings and flirts of its tail: the pilot waves, and you wave back, and you think: "My God, I wouldn't care to be so far out in an aeroplane," and he is probably thinking: "My God, I wouldn't care to be down there in that sea,": the sense of being on the job together is a very strong one. Some of them are well worth looking at, too; especially the Catalinas, extraordinarily graceful

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in flight, and the squared-off businesslike Whitleys.

Usually they are most discreet, going away into corners to look at suspicious waves and then scampering back to report. And of course, as a means of keeping submarines out of harm's way below the surface, they have, time and again, proved themselves invaluable.

Cross talk:

Destroyer: "Can't you keep up?"

Corvette: "We have been investigating astern."

Destroyer: "Well done."

A big convoy at sea, well closed up and keeping good station, has an immense air of purpose. Seen as a whole, it is a fine and rewarding spectacle. Lines of ships—big ships, loaded deep: ships crammed with deck-cargo, ships with aeroplanes all over their upper-works, like pealed almonds stuck in a pudding: bluff good-looking tankers (a modern

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tanker is probably the best-kept and best-looking ship of all)—they make up a whole fleet, an Armada which no onslaught of the enemy can scatter. Round them the corvettes and destroyers play, almost in droves; a ring hard to crack, harder still to pierce. One can only feel proud to be one of the company, to be trusted with a watch and a ship when there is so much at stake and when such grim efficiency is the rule.

Some of the destroyers in company may have famous names, many of the corvettes a string of successes to their credit. Often we know some of the customers, too. There may be ships in the convoy that we have escorted half-a-dozen times before, old friends that have survived many a rough party and are still coming up for more. Sometimes they recognise us, and send individual greetings. We like that. But it is the convoy as a whole that takes the eye and the imagination. Making its steady and determined way, having limitless

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reserves of power and nerve to call on, it is, somehow, such a good thing to belong to.

Christmas at sea brings no holly, no turkey: only the snow is seasonable, only the lovely Christmas surprise may still make its appearance. "I've sent a hand after to read the Yule log," said M. to me as I came up on the bridge at midnight. "And I've been saving that joke since ten o'clock. A happy Christmas to you!"

In the morning, a festive signal from the Commodore: "Happy Christmas. Keep well closed up." In the afternoon, a long-range Santa Claus, showering seasonable gifts rather wide of the mark with no one's name on them this time. In the evening, a rising sea which filled our stockings for us. Never mind: one day nearer home.

After checking depth-charges:

"Next time we drop one of these it may not kill a submarine—it may not even explode—but by God! We'll have its right number."

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One incredibly dreary slow convoy, which sometimes seemed to be no more than drifting with the Gulf Stream, was redeemed and indeed glorified by the fact that the Commodore had had a difference of opinion with the leading ship of the nearest column, and the two of them spent their time enlivening the watch and each other by exchanging cracks, of which "Pay more attention to station-keeping" and "Your signal is wrongly hoisted and meaningless" were the least objectionable. "What's the hoist?" I would ask the signalman, as an effervescent burst of bunting fluttered up, covering all halliards and overflowing to the triatic stay. "Another alter-course?"

The signalman, examining a little-used part of the code-book shook his head.

"No, sir—they're just chewing each other's ears off again. Something about 'discharge of offensive waste matter'."

Satisfactory sight: two convoys, outward and inward bound, meeting within half a mile

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of each other, nearly halfway across the Atlantic. Naval navigation!

The first time we met an American escort-group at sea, and took over their convoy from them, was an occasion which should have been dramatic, and was of course nothing of the sort. There *was* a small exchange of international courtesies, including (from them): "Hope the convoy itself will be American one of these days," which we thought handsome of them, as well as accurately prophetic; but there the hands-across-the-sea stuff began and ended. (I'm not sure what I had been expecting; something heroic in the *March of Time* style, possibly.) But it was good to see the Stars and Stripes again, for the first time in this war, and to know that a potent ally was, officially or not, ranged on our side at last. I had latterly been meeting a certain number of Americans ashore, mostly ferry-pilots resting between transatlantic trips of delivering bombers—men, outspokenly partisan, who had certainly known their own mind and translated it

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into action: doubly welcome were their sea-going counterparts, blessed by authority and free to wear their uniforms.

Ordeal for an officer-of-the-watch; corvettes and destroyers (of unequal speed, turning circle, and general manœuvrability) hurrying to a rendezvous in line abreast: set speed, zig-zag an exact number of degrees every few minutes, and damn your eyes (with the widest publicity) if you get out of station.

In any case the rendezvous is very likely an impossible one: 300 miles at 15 knots in half a gale, on the off-chance of finding twenty ships that have been hove-to for three days in a position depending on a week-old estimate: with visibility less than two miles, and about six hours of daylight to play with. No wonder the senior officers of escort-groups are men of half-humorous despair.

For a convoy to heave-to in bad weather, especially if it has to turn to face a following gale, endless care is needed, and a good slice

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of luck as well. There may be sixty ships or more, close together and with unequal and sometimes very large turning-circles, swinging round 180 degrees into the wind, and many of them may have been yawing wildly for the past hour. Getting round is a slow operation—for the smaller ships dangerously so; and when it is accomplished there is usually a good deal of trimming up to be done before the convoy is in shape again.

In the night they separate for safety's sake, perhaps clinging to one consort, one pin-point stern light in a howling wilderness; shouldering the waves, shaking themselves free of water when they ship a heavy one, their screws turning just enough to keep steerageway. On watch in a corvette, it is a matter of patience, and a damned good lookout: for there is usually some smart-alec who decides that he's had enough of it, and squares away before the gale and comes roaring down wind at fourteen knots, leaving it to the other bloke to get out of the way.

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When daylight comes, if the weather has moderated, we look hopefully round, sight one ship and then a couple more, dash backwards and forwards persuading them to form up; and then, with, say, six tankers and a couple of merchant packets in company, comes the job of guessing the night's drift, roughing out some sort of D.R. position, and laying a course for the next rendezvous or landfall. If you sight other ships on the way, you coax them into the party; sometimes it is a case of two corvettes, each with a miniature convoy in tow, trying to attract custom by bluffing about the sights they haven't taken or by specious promises of joining the main body in two hours at the outside. . . . And of course, you pray all the time for improving weather, and a sight of the sun which will put an end to guesswork and prevent the whole issue running ashore at either Namsos or Ostend.

Terrific calculations take place as soon as we make our first landfall: calculations as in-

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tricate and as dependent on fortune as any Delphic prophecy.

The stake is a high one—the saving of a tide. If the main diverted portion causes no delay when it breaks off; if the convoy can increase speed by at least half a knot; if we are not landed with X, Y or Z portions, bound for different ports; if we can find the Outer Buoy quickly, and part company there instead of escorting all the way home (usually the canteen-boat's job); if we can then break the port speed-limit without attracting the attention of an examination vessel; if there is no fog in the approaches; if we can get upriver in an hour and a quarter, and oil in two and a half—then we'll just get through the dock-gates with ten minutes to spare, and gain a whole night ashore.

Signal from air-escort over convoy:

“Fancy escorting a bloody Irishman.”

Destroyers sometimes lose the convoy.

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Then, having been unseen for three days, they dash up when the convoy is just going upriver and start signalling all round the horizon. In the end, you come to think that they have been there the whole time, without any unaccountable gaps.

Perhaps they even deceive themselves.

Once, when we were nearing home, we had a signal that mines had been laid in the approach-channel, and that ships were to anchor until the fairway was clear. Escort-vessels congregated while sweeping was going on, seemingly impatient, but when the port was declared open there was no sort of competition to be first down the line. A great deal of cumbersome manœuvring took place, and such signals as "Please pass ahead of me"—"I am not oiling now, go ahead"—"My speed reduced to three knots, will go up last" passed to and fro like smooth drawing-room courtesies. . . . Finally a large baleful destroyer signalled to the junior corvette, "Proceed upriver forthwith," and the rest of us fell grace-

fully into line. Dinner with the Borgias was served.

There is satisfaction in delivering a big convoy: a long line of laden ships that have been in company for thousands of miles, now moving slowly upriver at the end of their journey, is one of the finest sights that the war can offer. No wonder one watches them with pride, and a certain proprietary pleasure as well: they have been a responsibility for many days and nights, and now the responsibility is discharged. Even if there are gaps they are not big ones, they have been closed and forgotten in the routine triumph of the majority.

That's why we like our job, I suppose: it shows results. We are proud of those results, and a lot of other things besides. And why not? We *are* proud of our ship, of the way she can take it and the tough answers she can hand out in return; we think she's a grand outfit to belong to. We are proud of our crack gun's-crews, and of our immensely resourceful signalmen. (I myself am proud of my depth-charge sec-

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tion: the last time it was in action it tossed the things overboard like chicken-feed and, in rough weather, broke its own *harbour* record for firing and reloading.)

We are proud of the scores of convoys we have escorted, proud of being a good ship's company. We have to be: the job calls for nothing less. We have seamen aboard who can meet any emergency and deal with it; and the Captain is the best seaman of all. We are proud of that, too.

We like reading about ourselves in the newspapers; we enjoy what one might call their highly-coloured understatements. We are the smallest ships that operate regularly in the North Atlantic in winter. We have to keep going in appalling weather, weather that must really be seen to be believed. After a long and rough trip, when everything in the mess-decks—bedding, lockers, spare gear—has been wet through for days, and cooking anything but tea has been out of the question, we may have to oil, store and go out again, all in a matter of

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hours. We may be closed up at action-stations for days on end: certainly we are often never out of our clothes for a fortnight or more at a stretch.

Why not be proud? Destroyers are all right, of course; but corvettes are the tough babies, and we're in corvettes.

For a variety of reasons the job is very much easier in summer. The weather is kind, the sun a blessing, the nights short and (up North) barely dark. With only three hours or so to develop their attack, submarines can by day be kept below the surface by our aircraft, and be unable to catch the convoy up in the short time when surface progress is feasible for them. But against this, longer daylight gives the bombers far more chance; sometimes darkness is only the respite between two attacks.

It is a harsh fate (or a harsh admiral) which sends corvettes, not equipped with refrigerators or more than a limited supply of fresh

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meat and vegetables, on the southbound run in summer—fifteen days or more of blinding heat, solaced by tinned beans and beautiful corned beef. Coming on top of Arctic weather all winter, it did seem that they were doing their worst for us. And how quickly summer was over: two Gibraltar runs and a boiler-clean, and we were back to the merry North Atlantic, and a particularly murderous party in vile weather to kick off with.

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GOING DOWN TO GIBRALTAR, in midsummer.

The sea became calmer than ever, the sky a deeper blue, the sun a hot caress. The barometer scaled unbelievable heights, and stayed there. Daily the sextant-angle at the meridian showed a more tropical figure. We passed whales, and basking sharks, and once even a turtle paddling manfully. M. swore to having seen flying-fish in his watch: a warm breeze,

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imaginatively spiced with oranges, blew from the southeast; and odd rigs were seen about the ship—bare legs, singlets, sandals, shameful tattooings. . . . Even the fact that, after ten days at sea, meals now consisted (in tropical heat) of tinned sausages and beans and smoking-hot potatoes in their jackets, and that there was no lime-juice or fruit of any kind, could not spoil the attraction of that southward journey.

It was the genuine summer begun at last, the relief and compensation we had all been waiting for, throughout months of winter hardship; no wonder there were sing-songs and the drone of a mouth-organ in the dog-watches, no wonder there were naked stokers laid out like half-cooked bullocks on the after-deck, no wonder that, in the canvas bath rigged in the port waist, a noisy roadhouse gaiety was soon under way. This was what we had all been earning, ever since the black onset of last October.

And what a landfall was granted us to finish

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up with: Spain on the port hand and Africa on the starboard; Cape Trafalgar and Cape Spartel, with a glow in the sky ahead marking the lit waterfront of Tangier. My watch ended with Tangier abeam, but I stayed on, while it grew lighter, and Tarifa came into view, and an extraordinary smell of burnt grass came out of Africa, and dawn broke and the Rock showed at last, and the failing lighthouse off Europa Point winked twice and then gave in to the sun.

The harbour was full of heavy stuff, the Rock, close to, was as impressive as I had expected, and always suggesting more than it revealed—stones that were something else, scrub that surely hid weapons, sunlight over all, a bristling fortress decked out as scenery. Gibraltar becomes a sort of Boom Town at night, the narrow streets cramped with Forces in white or khaki shorts: standing, as I did, at a balcony window with a tallish glass of Tio Pepe sherry, one looks down on Main Street

chockful of people, a parading stream eddying out at the corners and overflowing into shops and bars. The latter, luring customers with music and chorus-singing, do a roaring trade; and in the oddly-named shops everyone buys silk stockings and cosmetics and perfumes of considerable fame and rarity and suspicious abundance.

Travel, for the lazy or romantic, is by gharry—a species of crazy open four-wheel cab, very light and springy, which dash about like operatic chariots. There is (or was) no blackout: women are rare, and wary.

On our first night ashore we attended rather a good party given by some Merchant Navy survivors who seemed to think they owed us a drink or two. We met them in the Grand, all toggled up in Gibraltar suits and rainbow shirts, and we had an uproarious polyglot session, with Swedes, Dutch, Belgians, and Danes bobbing up continuously to drink our healths and (presumably) return formal thanks to us. But we felt we needed none of that: theirs had

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been the ordeal and theirs the brave endurance.

Thoughts after a shopping expedition.

One cannot help being conscious of a certain futility in convoying, sometimes at great risk and loss of life, shiploads of goods to Gibraltar, in order to buy them in the shops there and bring them back by corvette. Rough trips apart, I think this was one of the reasons why we came to dislike what some of us called "The Gibraltar Packet" and others "The Silk-Stocking Run."

We were lying almost in the shadow of the *Ark Royal*, rather an uncomfortable neighbour to have, the target-ship of two angry Air Forces. It must be odd to be in a "hunted" ship like that, always being shadowed, always ripe for an attack: knowing that whatever port you put into, you're sure to be traced before very long, knowing also that the inhabitants are probably saying, "Nice to see them, but I wish they'd move on somewhere else. . . ."

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One of the best things about our stay at Gibraltar was wearing tropical kit—white shirt and shorts, white stockings and shoes, and white cap cover—an extraordinary cool rig which made one feel fresh and clean immediately one put it on. Forgotten were duffle-coats, seaboot-stockings, thick oiled-wool sweaters; this, at last, was the luxury life we had been born to. . . . We used to work in the morning, not very hard—since our mails had not caught us up there was hardly any official business: “pipe-down” would be sounded after lunch, “liberty-men to clean” at four, and after that there was nothing to do but enjoy ourselves.

Usually we would bathe at Rosia Bay, swimming out into the Mediterranean as if it were once more an *haut monde* playground; and then, in the cool of the evening, we would walk down into the town, and there shop lazily, and sip sherry at the Embassy Bar or the Bristol, and dine *à l'espagnol* off onion soup and rice-with-trimmings and smooth Algerian wine: the kind of dinner that goes on

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and on. . . . It was out-of-the-war, of course, and almost traitorously escapist: too much of it would have made us feel guilty, and destroyed its savour; but as a severely rationed interlude we felt that we could take all that came our way.

We were lucky not to come in for a bloody job which fell to another corvette—taking another ship's dead to sea and burying them.

What with the hot weather and the fact that most of them had spent two days in an oil tank (where an explosion had blown them) the corpses were already nearly liquid; but they were yanked out, identified, sewn up in blankets, and wheeled across to the corvette—cozy packets trundled by men with handkerchiefs tied over the nose and mouth. . . . There they lay all night, leaking a vile and sickening fluid into the scuppers, sprayed at intervals, watched by a quartermaster (what a job for a young rating!) and on the following night they were buried—and for a week afterwards

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a stink hung about that ship that no effort or antidote could get rid of.

That must have been an odd burial: pitch darkness, the chaplain shining a torch on his prayer-book, the pipe shrilling as thirty-eight bodies went down the chute one by one, making one their successive quick trails of phosphorescence. But if the opportunity offered on another occasion, I should still be willing to take the description at second hand.

We were in collision, in thick fog, with a Portuguese trawler on one of our homeward trips; very little was damaged besides the port boat and a section of bow-plating, but while it lasted the encounter was impressive.

Fog tests the judgment very highly indeed, particularly in convoy, where the way in which a nearby ship can fade away as if washed over with dirty chalk, makes station-keeping half guess-work and half a sort of direction-finding by ear. All the senses are alert. You stand on the bridge, sniffing cold vaporous air, listening

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to and trying to tabulate the various fog-horns, staring at the blank wall ahead; with the engines at "Slow" and the oily sea making no noise against the bows, the silence is extraordinary. Deceptive also: fog blankets the sound in some directions, magnifies it in others: the look-out or the signalman will sing out "Whistle on the starboard beam!" when you have just classified the sound as coming from dead astern, if not slightly to port. . . . Either may be right: it's not a question of good hearing or even of practice, it is luck: the signalman may have heard the sound directly, you may have heard it reflected off a layer or a bank of colder air. You cannot know for certain: all that is certain is that you must make up your mind, and then act—decisively, unhesitatingly—one way or another.

But in this case confusions of sound did not enter into it: the trawler, lit but silent, came at us at right angles on the port bow: if she had not hit us she would have hit one of the ships in convoy. We sighted her lights about

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a minute before the collision; she was moving far too fast, and there came the instant realisation (*felt* rather than calculated) that we would not miss each other: having given all possible orders (“One short blast”—“Hard astarboard”—“Full astern”—“Sound mess-deck alarm bell”—“Close water-tight doors”) we could only stand on the bridge and wait for it. There was a sound of air going into life-jackets at high pressure. . . . The lights, suddenly very near and menacing seemed to throw themselves at us; there was one startled shout from the bridge of the trawler, and then the crash.

Not a sharp crash, but a long-drawn-out grinding; due to our quick turn to starboard we had closed on a converging course, our port bow to his starboard one, instead of a right-angle cut which might well have sunk one or other of us. The two ships closed, surging against each other, parted momentarily, and then closed again: expensive smashing noises came from up forrard, and below me

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the port boat, splintered and stove-in, was forced over its griping spar and fell in-board. We could see the trawler clearly now, in the few moments before she sheered off: a big heavily-built ship with high spoon bows, and one man on the bridge staring up at us as if roughly wakened from a deep dream. Perhaps such was the case. Then we drifted apart, and the trawler faded out once more till only her lights could be seen.

Sent below by the Captain to see what the damage was, I forced my way through a throng of half-asleep and rather reproachful ratings, and went into the mess-decks. It was odd, and disconcerting, to see light through the bow-plating, but the main damage seemed to be well above the water-line, the forepeak being still quite dry, and in fact remaining so for the rest of the trip. (Rough weather, of course, would have made it quite a different matter, but we were lucky in that respect.) I attended to one casualty, a surprised steward who had

been thrown out of his cot and had cracked a rib, and then went up to the bridge to report.

Up on the bridge also was a Leading Stoker, a reputed linguist who had been summoned to address the trawler through the loud-hailer. The exchange was a short one, and inconclusive at that. He called out, "*Barco! Habla Ingles?*" and the answer came back: "Portuguese ship! You damn fool!" And that was really all; she claimed no damage, we were fit to proceed, and there was a convoy to attend to; so after we had prised her name and number out of her (a long and disjointed business, sounding rather like a badly translated play) we rang "slow ahead" and got back on our course. It might have been very much worse; and thoughts of leave while the ship was under repair certainly sweetened the rest of the watch.

The upper-works of an odd ship showed themselves above the horizon.

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“Close me!” signalled Senior Corvette decisively. “Am going to investigate.”

We wound up to something near our maximum speed, we turned to starboard and laid a course for the stranger. Within a quarter of an hour it was revealed not as one ship but rather a lot—battleships, cruisers, a big ring of destroyers, escorting aircraft droning overhead. . . . After a surprised moment: “Resume previous course,” signalled the Senior Corvette: “Formation is friendly.” As we turned to port again we signalled back “What price glory?”

We had an engine breakdown one morning, when we were by ourselves and on our way to a rendezvous: a knock developed, slight at first and then growing and growing till it seemed to fill the whole ship. Before long it was obvious that we would have to stop engines and investigate: never a popular necessity in the Western Approaches. . . . The repairs took us about six hours, and during all

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that time we lay motionless, our sea-boats swung out, the perfect target for air or underwater attack. We had, of course, wirelessly our position; but a feeling of tension filled the whole ship—it was a very clear day, and one looked round the immense circle of wide flat sea and thought: somewhere in that circle there may be, at this very moment, a submarine looking at us through its periscope and shaping up for an attack. Perhaps more than one submarine; perhaps a clutch of half a dozen. . . . Said M. to me, reflectively: “In the old days there used to be an order, ‘Down funnel, up sail!’ I wish we could give it now.”

I remember going down to the engine-room to see if I could hurry things up at all, finding a ring of engine-room ratings, Stoker Petty-Officers, and the Chief gathered round the offending crank-shaft, and withdrawing again without saying anything. Anxiety was excusable: but it was obvious that they were doing their utmost, without any chivvying from the bridge.

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When we got going again you could almost hear the ship sigh with relief. A straight scrap we don't mind: we do mind being at the wrong end of a target-practice.

The next time it happened to us we were in company, which made things a lot easier, and we could also manage slow speed without tearing things to bits. But as we had the prospect of at least ten days at sea, and the damage might easily become worse, we made a signal to the senior corvette, telling her the tale and requesting permission to return to harbour for adjustment or repairs. The reply came back: "Approved. Do you require an escort?" to which we answered: "Would prefer it if possible."

From the other corvettes through whom the exchange had been passed came an instant twitter of signals, full of resource and inventiveness. "Am prepared to escort *Flower* to base," was the generous offer of one. "My A/S gear unsatisfactory, suggest I return with *Flower*," said a second, in whom eagerness had

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induced some rather muddled thinking. "Would be glad of a chance to refuel," was a third optimistic suggestion, which would not stand even superficial scrutiny. . . . But it was the Senior Officer himself who made the great sacrifice. "Follow me," he signalled: "returning to harbour in company. What is your maximum safe speed?"

Coming alongside a French-manned oiler.

I went aft in pitch-darkness, trying to think of the exact French equivalent of "Take that fore-spring forrard and make it fast."

After strife. We sailed into the inlet in the dusk of early evening and into a different world. There was a little village opposite our anchorage, with an unromantic name: but what a village! There were lights in its streets; there were windows uncurtained—or curtained in friendly yellows and blues and reds such as we had not seen for months; there were buses with unscreened lamps; and yellow bi-

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cycle lights; and a bonfire or two—dusk here was not the beginning of total gloom or the onset of danger but the signal for lighting the hearth and the way, for the comfortable exchanges of neighbour and neighbour.

From the bridge we stared at it in astonishment, for it was violently against the law and it invited the contemporary horrors. And then we realised. It was not a defiant village, it was the other half of the world, the world free from fear and preserving its sanity: it was Ireland, Ireland still evading the toils. It was peace. . . . And often during the evening we would come up from below to look at it, staring in contemplative wonder at this strangest of all sights—dear normality: and in some degree or other we all thought: “Christ, this war! If only we lived across there. . . .” The international aspect was (to me) obscure; for here we were at anchor, one of His Majesty’s ships of war in commission which had somehow escaped hateful reality and come upon a haven. Was it a licenced haven, or was it the blind

eye? And how little it mattered! Dear village, dear cottages lighted and unafraid, dear unharmed corner of a scarcely-remembered world.

In the morning the international aspect became (again, to me) even more obscure, for we signalled to the Irish side, and presently took off an Irish pilot. He was small, diffident, and efficient; and when I inquired how it was that Irish pilots were allowed to pilot British men-of-war, he made the entirely reasonable comment:

“Now why should you be sending up the river for a Six-Counties man when there’s a good Irish pilot waiting for you on the doorstep itself?”

The channel was, at times, extremely narrow. Said the Captain, standing by my side, unexpectedly:

“You’ve only got to give ‘hard astarboard’ and we could all be interned for the duration.”

Conversation-piece in Northern Ireland:

“Go ashore and get me a paper.”

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"Any special one, sir?"

"Yes, get me *The Independent*."

"*The Independent*, sir?"

"Yes, there's sure to be an *Independent*."

And there was.

Northern Ireland was another place where we slackened off, in a rather special way. For some reason our stay there developed into a faintly mad-house session, the effect of Ireland on a normally hard-working and routine-ridden ship's company being to induce a sort of fairylike unreality. In fact, we all became Irish, and made the most of it.

Odd, unexplained people came aboard, and ate their lunches on the upper deck; disreputable children wandered about at will hazarding their teeth on ship's biscuit. A feud developed with the corvette alongside: the rival quarter-masters faced each other across the gangway, muttering threats and fingering their side-arms; it was nothing for respectable petty-officers, returning from liberty via the other

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ship's fo'c'sle, to report to the Officer-of-the-day in some such formula as "Returning on board, sir, with fender and heaving-line." We went for a bicycle ride past the Eire customs (a signpost by the roadside, deserted after office hours) and returned, laden with eggs, butter and strawberries, and impelled by Guinness to a breakneck speed. Couponless, I was able to buy some silk stockings by initiating a whip-round among the shop-girls, who each contributed one coupon and a brilliant smile. The Captain, drinking in a pub on the dock-side, found himself joined by his four officers, one after the other. I counted them as they arrived, and presently realised that there was no one left on board. (It was attributed to lack of liaison, excused, and very shortly forgotten.) And among many other manifestations of the Irish spirit, there was a second case of creating vandalism in the mess-decks.

On our last night I went ashore with H., our recently-joined junior officer, a jovial ex-barrister of spacious build. I recall two things

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about that night. The first was seeing a huge church, almost a cathedral, with a lighted porch beckoning us across the street; on an impulse I said: "Let's light a candle to the holy saints above" (that was how one talked in Ireland) and we tiptoed in, slightly awe-struck, chockful of milk-stout and religious feeling. Inside the porch, the first thing we saw was a blue notice: "YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE," and the second a placard: TOWN HALL A.R.P. STATION. FEMALE DECONTAMINATION CASES, FIRST ON THE RIGHT." The other thing I remember was asking at the hotel if drinks were procurable after hours, and being cheerily answered: "Sure they are, sir—there's a Naval Base upstairs." There was, too—almost a floating one.

A boiler-clean seems to render the ship, and the duty-officer, quite derelict.

With the boilers blown down, the whole ship is very cold: she is lit by unreliable shore-lighting which has a habit of packing up when you need it most, she has a general air of dis-

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use not lessened by most of her innards being spread out over the engine-room casing. All officers except yourself are on leave. You sit and sit (and drink and drink) and nibble at the enormous amount of paper-work before you: other corvette officers in the same position come over to grouse in company, friendly destroyer-blokes come aboard to borrow stationery and stay to commiserate; it is like a Chekhov play pushed sideways into the dock. And then, as sometimes happens, repairs take a long time. When you miss your group, when weeks elapse and there is still no sign of going to sea, then a positive rotting-away atmosphere seems to set in. Friends come back from long and hard trips, and make pointed remarks about depot ships. Someone chalks "*H.M.S. Wallflower*" in a prominent position opposite the gangway. You find yourself looking round the wardroom and thinking: we can't move now—imagine the break with tradition. . . . And so on, in any case, there will not be enough oil left to go and get some more.

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There are shore-blokes who come aboard when you are trying to work and expect a mid-morning gin as an inalienable right. There are shore-blokes who, having got that gin, lean comfortably back and enlarge on the theme: "I *wish* I could get to sea instead of being stuck ashore." Some, wistful ones, really mean it: others patently do not. H. and I developed a rather amusing game with people whom we thought were shooting a line in this respect: we would let them run on, telling us the sad tale of their frustration and we would then profess ourselves willing *and able*, to get them sea-going jobs any time they wanted them. "My uncle, the Admiral, can easily fix it for you," H. would say, with a great air of patronage. "What job would you like? Minesweeping at Sierra Leone?" There would be half-hearted agreement and a pinned-on smile, and then, rather late in the day, the bad news that the speaker, after all, had a tendency to catarrh, which unfortunately precluded war-like activity. Othewise, of course . . .

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You get sick of them in the end; you cannot help contrasting natural wire-pullers who get themselves snug jobs, with natural co-operators who take whatever job is given them and get on with it. To the gin you pour out for them is added a fairly stiff measure of contempt.

And there is the other kind: the inshore hero, who sits at the end of the bar. He has one of those tiddley little yachts which breeze up and down the river bullying merchantmen and sending us silly signals like "You have given the wrong recognition letters," or, "You are approaching a prohibited anchorage" or "You have a fender hanging over the stern.". He gets command-money, hard-lying money, and a reputation for coolness and courage. He is invariably in great form in the bar, as brave as a lion, explaining what is wrong with our convoy-screening system, using two tumblers and an ashtray and gestures of unflinching defiance.

Later on, when we had run through despair

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and dull resignation, we became much more light-hearted about paper-work; doing our best with it, certainly, but refusing to be worried by accumulations which we could not avoid. Back from a ripe convoy, you can't exactly give a broadside of enthusiasm to preparing a memorandum on the advantages experienced from using wrapped bread: particularly when you are fresh (hardly the right word) from ten days' hacking at ship's biscuit. . . . To delve at random into the "Pending" file, to pick out some likely-looking morsel, blow the dust off, and deal concisely with it—surely that's the most the paymaster branch can expect.

There are "strong" characters among the crew who wear you down, by doing things they shouldn't and always having to be told about it. One day you forget to tell them, or you get tired and think: "Oh, hell, it'll all be the same in a hundred years," and there you are: a precedent is established, and they have wor

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yet another round. There are others who make vaguely insubordinate remarks, just within hearing: they are trying it on, and unless checked will make a habit of it and get out of control; but how can you check a man for saying, "I wouldn't pick a Jerry out of the water, orders or no orders." Surely it would be better to wait till the occasion arises, and then take the appropriate strong action.

Alternatively, how difficult it is to tick off a good bloke, well-behaved and efficient, who suddenly goes wrong—or who, perhaps from carelessness, develops some habit you do not like. For by his good behaviour he has, almost, earned a privileged position, or at least the right to a certain latitude; you respect each other, and there is an undercurrent of friendship: is it worth spoiling this for something basically unimportant, some petty toe-the-line regulation? In a way, you yourself should make some effort and sacrifice towards the smooth working of the ship: and this ac-

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ceptance of individual foibles may be part of that effort.

One finds difficulty also in ticking off someone like a Chief Engine-room Artificer, old enough to be your father and at least as individualist.

Numbered among the crew are unknown humorists, whom you only learn about accidentally, when you happen to go forrard in the dog-watches: there you find an able-seaman, whom you had set down as slow and none too bright, giving a mouth-organ recital or an exhibition dance to his enthralled messmates, or a cross-talk act quite good enough for the music halls, if quite unsuitable thereto. To be rated as humorists, also, in a different tradition were the two superior ordinary seamen, recommended for commissions, who put in a brief enchanted period in our lower deck. Of them it is related, that, on first coming aboard, they strode into the stokers' mess-deck and asked cheerily: "Are there any other Cambridge

chaps here?" I have had no reliable account of the stokers' reaction.

They came to fit in better than that later on, though there was one whose habit it was, when on lookout duty, to report anything of interest with the words: "I say, sir, rather suspicious object over there!" (His best effort was: "I say, sir—waterspout!" It was a lighthouse.)

It is perhaps worth touching on the problem (not applicable in this case) of what to do with a really useless rating of this sort—i.e. a "gent," who simply does not satisfy naval standards of seamanship. Sooner or later you may have to send in a report on him—an honest report which decides his future sphere of usefulness. To keep him in the ship as an A.B. is to keep so much dead wood: the status of officer might just enable him to pull his weight. But is promotion to be on these lines? Should good manners and lack of a localised accent draw the attention and give a man such a pull? Surely it should be the best *sailors* who are advanced to commissions, rather than

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men of gentle birth, about whose naval future one is in despair.

In my capacity as Senior Medical Officer (acting, unpaid) I once had occasion to send a chit to Naval Sick Quarters, to accompany "So-and-so, Stoker, First class, who is believed to be suffering from the complaint commonly known as crabs." The answer came back in due course, signed by a Surgeon-Lieutenant, R.N.V.R.: "I confirm your diagnosis and add that your stoker is also suffering from the complaint commonly known as the Itch (scabies). For your future reference, crabs, by the way, are called *Pediculosis Pubis* or Little Pattering Feet on the Private Parts."

I should like to meet that man.

A Commander visited the ship, to give us pleasure and the onceover: with a comet-tail of officers he toured us very thoroughly, asking innumerable questions (dear me, we thought, what an inquisitive man): for some reason he

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picked on H. as the weakest link in the chain, and what a good guess that turned out to be.

"What's your job?" he asked H. as soon as he got on board.

"Barrister, sir," answered H., cheerfully, glad to be on safe ground. "I'd been in practice about five years when—"

"I meant your job in the ship," interrupted the Commander, looking rather old-fashioned at him.

"Signal officer, sir."

"Ah. . . . How many ten-inch projectors do you carry?" he asked, when we were up on the signal bridge.

H., confusing *projector* (a Morse lamp) with *projectile*, and none too certain about either, replied:

"I'm not sure, sir. And I'm afraid the Gunnery Officer is on leave."

The Commander got out of this impasse by ignoring it. I suppose he thought he had been misheard, or perhaps he had already decided

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that H. was rather simple. We moved on, a silent, thoughtful party.

A little later on a sound of Morse, coming in at high speed, was heard from the W/T cabinet.

"Can you read that?" asked the Commander, rounding on H. suddenly.

"No, sir."

"Pity. You could intercept the German broadcasts."

The picture of H., a slow mover, intercepting German broadcasts in Morse was too much for me. I turned away, and gave my attention to some nearby paintwork. H., visibly weakening, but still rashly eager to clear his yard-arm, tried to put the reasonable citizen's viewpoint.

"I'm afraid it's rather too fast for me, sir."

"I thought you said you were the Signal Officer," said the Commander, as if he could not believe his ears.

"Well—*faute de mieux*, sir."

"What?"

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"Faute de mieux, sir."

"Oh." . . . A keen glance, suspicious of insolence. *"Faute de mal*, I should think you mean."

The French may have been vulnerable, but the thought was clear.

Our former leading-steward, when rebuked (which was often), had the habit of going into the pantry and saying in a loud carrying voice to the assistant-steward:

"Steward, you've *let me down!* I told you to get tea, and now the officers are *waiting!*"

Lighting up the boiler, the young stoker explained the process for my benefit as he went along.

He turned a few knobs, seemingly at random, and then took up a sort of long-handled pair of tongs with a piece of cotton-waste at the end. This he dipped in a can of oil, and lit with a match: then he opened a small door under the boiler, and thrust it within. There

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was a subdued roar, and then a glow through half a dozen small windows. He turned two more knobs, and then began to watch, carefully, a pressure-gauge above his head.

He looked very young to be allowed to play about the machinery like that.

Sunday morning: returning from short leave, driving into the port after a bad blitz.

Outside the town, a lovely sunny day; but ahead there were billows of black smoke, and soon the air was fouled by smuts, charred paper drifting on the wind,* an over-all reek of destruction. As we made our way the air grew darker and darker, shutting out the sun, the sky, the corners ahead. Each street we traversed by a dozen diversions, bumping over hoses, scuttering through broken glass and ruined woodwork, passing groups of intent rescue-workers or silent onlookers, showed a more appalling destruction. Tall houses lay

* During the morning a rating brought aboard a half-burned page from a Statute-Book which he had picked up seven miles outside the town.

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in the street, flames showed through empty windows and gaping rents, shops and buildings sprawled over the roadways. The night must have been a fearful one.

Then progress became impossible, before the smoky chaos at the top of the main street, I tapped the taxi-driver on the shoulder and called out: "That'll do: I'll walk the rest." By force of habit he gave the correct traffic signal and drew into the curb—directly beneath a blazing building whose roof had already crashed through three flights. . . . Across the street it was the same, and farther on the same, and all the way to the ship the same: what was not still burning lay in red-hot piles of brick and wood, what was not torn to pieces was blasted into a vile disorder. Even to the casual observer it was a frightful scene—the mounting furnaces, the thick smoke-filled air, the huge spaces laid waste; to a man born in that town it was heartbreaking.

We waited on board that same evening, as

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the hands crawled round the clock towards another night, another testing-time, another ordeal. Hoses were rigged, sand-buckets filled and placed, wires run out to the opposite side of the dock in case the tall building alongside should take fire; the duty-watch were given their instructions and warned to stand by. But all these precautions seemed to be off-set, rendered foolish even, by the opposing facts—the ship lay in the heart of the docks, and within a hundred yards two incontrollable fires raged, unsubdued from the previous night, pointing beacons across the whole night sky. The day died, the fires showed stronger; at midnight the expected syrens went again.

It wasn't one of the worst raids: but it sufficed, it passed muster. We had a number of incendiary bombs on the fo'c'sle and on the warehouses alongside; and some near-misses which fell in the dock made a disconcerting whistling sound. But the barrage, which had obviously been added to, was one of the most formidable things I had ever listened to; and

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at intervals the night-fighter boys tried their hand, the bursts of machine-gun fire being applauded by the crew. Then dawn, and a respite, and hot whisky all round.

We went down river at dusk, and anchored at the entrance, and from there watched the last heavy raid on the port. Occasionally a turning aircraft roared overhead, shaping up for another run over the target; but all one's attention was for the noise and the amazing display ashore—star-shells, flares, tracer from ships, the pin-point flicker of the barrage, the crash of bombs, the glow of fire spreading. A fine spectacle, and a sickening one.

Said the young Newfoundland rating at my side, slowly:

“I didn't reckon for this sort of war. There's women and children there.”

To be northbound again, on one of the last fair-weather days of the year, came as a relief after the dusty havoc of our spell ashore.

It was a lovely day, of bright and warming

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sunshine, and we had the morning to waste. So we loitered: doing turning-trials in a smother of wake, altering course to look at pieces of driftwood; flying homemade kites for machine-gun practice; firing off all the guns at once at an imaginary aeroplane which we brought down in spectral flames; sinking a mine by rifle-fire, dropping an adroit test-depth-charge and collecting the harvest of fish.

Second winter: rough weather again; but now we know all about it, now we've learned the drill, the routine of personal caution.

Hang on to something always: give no chances, secure everything movable, including the armchairs in the wardroom, clear your desk and wedge your books in the bookcase. When you are eating, watch with constant care the food and drink, which at any moment will dart for your lap. When you turn in, have your back against the bulkhead and crook your knees so that your thighs lie athwartships: this may keep you in place. But above all, if you don't want to be hurt, hang on to something,

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even if you're only taking a couple of steps: even if you are leaning against the bridge-rails having five minutes inoffensive think-of-home.

Second winter, second year in corvettes. Yes, it's all the same now: the job is standardised; survivors are even wounded in the same way, and all corpses are alike.

There *was* one change, however, and a marked one: it grew out of the sharpening crisis in our corner of the war, the quickening tempo of the Atlantic fight.

For things woke up, with the intensification of the Battle of the Atlantic that began in the turn of 1940-41: things came to the boil, and every phase of convoy-escort acquired a sharper edge to it. More danger for convoys, harder work for us. And more ships were sunk, though it wasn't a one-way affair by a long chalk—we drew more blood in the process, as the records will one day show. But this intensification brought with it a curious change in our outlook: it was, briefly, that we came to dislike everything that made sea-going easy

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and pleasant. To get convoys through, we wanted cover, and cover meant, in the last analysis, dirty weather.

It was odd to look forward, on setting out, to the chance of a gale—anyone who really wants the North Atlantic to do its worst in winter should be qualifying for a lunatic asylum—but that was what it amounted to. Before, all the emphasis of convoy work had been on navigation and station-keeping, and we had cursed the dark moonless nights, the rain and mist, the lumpy seas that multiplied our difficulties: now we hated the moon, and wanted only a black night and a bit of flying scud to draw the curtains round us. It made it infinitely harder to hang on to the convoy, it turned zigzagging into tip-and-run in the dark, but it was harder still for the submarines to trail us, and that weighed more than all the hardship and the intolerable strain that bad weather brings.

Oddest, and in a way maddest of all, was the fact that we tended to develop the same

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feeling about going off watch: it used to be so welcome, that tired descent, but now it meant not much more than going below the water-line and entering a possible trap. And to feel this about leaving the wet bridge and putting off the burden was another nut-house qualification which would, in any other circumstances have been conclusive. . . . But above all it was sad: it meant that we were being cheated, daily and hourly, of our just reward and recompense.

I'm not sure that I can truthfully talk of "we" where all this is concerned: the others may not have felt it so strongly, if, indeed, at all. Better, perhaps, to say that one watch-keeping officer in corvettes came to prefer the fresh air, and the fresher the better.

5.

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WHEN "ANTI-AIRCRAFT stations" was sounded I put my tin hat on and climbed up through the dusk to the after gun-turret. Under a clear frosty sky the gun's crew stood silent, watching, waiting, possibly nervous. I said something or other, and they laughed and relaxed: five young men steel-helmeted and closely wrapped against the cold, the white tops of their sea-boot stockings standing out in the gloom; five young men lis-

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tening for sound above the ordinary disregarded sound of the ship and the sea, staring at the stars across which the mast swung a slow arc. To be together, and to see the stocky gun-barrel cocked up at the sky like a jauntily-raised thumb, was to be reassured. . . . And then, head on one side, I heard the sound we were waiting for: far away on the other wing of the convoy a single line of tracer fled upwards: and without an order being given the crew closed up round their gun, the safety-catch clicked, and the layer slapped the breech with his mittened hand and said: "Come on, Rosie, win me a medal."

The brilliant fireworks of a dusk air-attack: the bomber flies very low above the columns, pursued and harried by crossfire from machine-gun tracer, by the quick pom-pom flashes, by the bursts of flame as the destroyers' big guns go into action. Sometimes you may see a line of tracer bullets describing a complete semicircle, like a glowing fan opening and shutting, as a plane flies low over a ship.

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Satisfactory (in default of bringing it down) was the sight of the day-bomber flying round and round the convoy in gradually widening circles, kept at bay and finally defeated by the escorts' long-range guns: each ship turning to bark at it, like a bad-tempered farm-dog, as the plane entered its sector.

A huge column of water is thrown up after a near-miss: it rises grey and white, edged with foam, higher than the ship, hiding it completely, so that for all we know it may have been hit. But when the turmoil subsides, there is the ship still ploughing on: and you look at it and think: "I bet that brought 'em up on deck with their braces dangling. . . ."

Sometimes a single bomb falls, very wide of the mark, and that is all—the ugly incident is closed: it's odd to think that a bomber may have flown a thousand miles to drop that one bomb 10,000 feet through the clouds a mile-an-a-half from the nearest ship, after which it turns round and heads for home again. . . .

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But that doesn't seem to alter the score, as far as Goebbels is concerned. I remember one occasion when, after a profitless and none too intrepid attack on the convoy by two Junkers-88's, no damage of any sort being done, we tuned into Haw-Haw the same evening. "This morning," said that snarling voice, "aircraft of our gallant Luftwaffe attacked an important convoy 500 miles southwest of the Scilly Isles. Two ships were sunk, one of 5,000 and the other of 2,000 tons, both have their whole sides ripped off: and others were damaged." Query: is this Goebbels own make-up, or is it based on the actual report of the aircraft concerned? If it's the aircraft, how mutually embarrassing it must be for their crews, all of whom know it to be a pack of lies. And if it's Goebbels, how foolish the airmen must feel to be given false credit, and how mistrustful of their own propaganda.

But now and then it is *they* who have the luck. After a quiet and unscathed journey of

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some 2,300 miles and fifteen days, it is depressing to lose a ship on your own front doorstep, to some bloody little aircraft returning from a raid with one spare bomb.

When, in convoy, the sun goes down and the order "Darken ship!" is piped, one has a feeling that the dividing line is being crossed from the comparative tranquillity of daylight to the hazard and the startling crudity of things that go bump in the night. It's a sort of private signal that the party is once more on, a moment which has come to mean a great deal on board, and it is attended with care—deadlights are dropped and screwed home, screens rigged at the mess-deck entrances, the shutters of the bridge and the wheel-house put in place and secured. Then the Duty Petty Officer makes his rounds—meticulous rounds, the most important made either at sea or in harbour; and when he comes up to the bridge and reports the ship darkened, one thinks: well, the convoy may be for it—we may be for

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it ourselves—but at least we're giving no chances and leaving no ends hanging out.

Among the minor trials of the middle watch are the porpoises which, with relish and great agility, play submarines at night—i.e., come darting at the ship's side at right angles, and then pass underneath with a swirl of phosphorescence. You get used to these April Fools after a bit, and almost feel like joining in the fun yourself, but the first few times, you find yourself ducking. . . .

There develops, unavoidably, a certain tension aboard as we approach the U-boat danger zone—when we know that at any moment from now on, we are going to be involved in some action which will test nerve and skill to the utmost: the feeling affects the whole ship, and it is almost a relief when the first explosion is heard and the first flare goes up, and you think: "Oh, well, this is it. . . ."

But the tension for us is really nothing compared with what it must be for the ships in

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convoy, and the amount of self-discipline and nerve needed to remain in station after another ship has been torpedoed. We at least have the relief—and possibly the safety—of action: we can crack on a few revs, fling ourselves about a bit, strike back formidably if the opportunity arises: but they have to wallow along as if nothing had happened—same course and station, same inadequate speed, same helpless target.

Imagine being on the bridge of a tanker, loaded deep with benzine that a spark might send sky-high, and seeing the ship alongside struck by a torpedo, or another torpedo slipping past your stern, *and doing nothing at all about it*. Imagine being a stoker, working half-naked many feet below the water-line, hearing the crack of explosions, knowing exactly what they mean, and staying down there on the job—shovelling coal or turning wheels, concentrating, making no mistakes, disregarding what you *know* may be only a few yards away and pointing straight at you.

No amount of publicity, no colourful write-ups, no guff about "the little silver badge," above all no medals, can do honour to men like these. Buy them a drink ashore, if you like; but don't attempt an *adequate* recompense. You won't get in the target area.

Going aft to my depth-charges, when "action-stations" is sounded, is now a routine which somehow never loses its significance or fails in its effect; and the start of the routine has itself become almost a ritual.

Time, possibly, one A.M. (good old middle watch—it gets all the knocks there are):

"Captain, sir!"

"What is it?"

"Second ship, starboard wing column, torpedoed, sir. They're firing star-shell the other side."

"Very good. Sound off action-stations. I'll be up in a second."

When I am relieved of the watch I make my way down the ladder and across the boat-deck:

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below me in the waist there is a clumping of sea-boots as the thrower-crews run aft to close up and clear away for action. There's time to look round as I cross the deck in darkness, ducking under the funnel-guy which I cannot see but which comes two steps after the last boiler-room grating, and always the view—or lack of it—is the same: black water, now seeming very much closer, the silhouette of a nearby ship, the glow from a flare: perhaps, already, the flickering lights low down on the water which mean lowered boats and rafts. Then the cox's'n passes me, on his way forrard to take over the wheel: and I say (as always): "A fine night, 'swain," and he says: "Let's drop a few for luck this time, sir"—another ritual which marks the occasion as an authentic one.

Leaning against the rail by the ensign-staff, I can see below me that thrower-crews are standing by waiting for their orders: farther aft there is a group of spare numbers—off-watch stokers and communication-ratings—ready to bear a hand in reloading. Farthest aft of all, I

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can just make out the Seaman-Torpedoman bending over his depth-charge rails: as soon as he sees me silhouetted above him he calls out, "All ready, sir," in a voice half formal, half eager. I happen to know that he very much likes dropping depth-charges. . . .

Probably there is a murmur of voices, some of them angrily blasphemous—we all realise what those lights on the water mean, from long practice we can translate them accurately into loss of life, disablement, mutilation. Standing ready in the darkness, we hope for luck, and action.

Strange people come to the surface when action-stations are sounded—stokers I had no idea were on board, rare faces that never otherwise see the light of day.

The first thing you notice when a ship has gone down is a hateful smell of oil on the water. (We grew to loathe that smell: as well as a ship sunk, it meant survivors drenched with fuel oil, coughing it up, poisoned by it.)

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But there is always an amazing amount of stuff left on the surface—crates, planks, baulks of wood, coal dust, doors, rope-ends, odd bits of clothing—a restless smear of debris, looking like a wrecked jumble-sale, on which the searchlight plays. Here and there lights may be flickering: too often they are not the ship's boats you are hoping for, but empty rafts with automatic calcium flares attached to them, burning uselessly, mute witnesses to disaster.

As soon as you come upon the scene you feel you must search it all thoroughly, you feel you must prowl round and miss nothing: you also *know* that you are not the only prowler, that even as you circle a raft or wait for a laden boat to come alongside, someone in the dark outer ring may be taking a sight of you, preparing as you loiter to run a fish and teach you the same lesson. Perhaps among the wreckage a white face or a raised arm appears: can you afford to wait, are they worth the risk of salvage, or will one more chance, one more effort of mercy, forfeit your ship? Already she is

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sufficiently in hazard: how much margin is there still left?

In semi-darkness we passed a dead man floating upright, supported by his life-jacket. We shouted at him, but he stared back in silence. To cover up, a stoker called out: "So you won't talk, eh?" and there was a tiny laugh, a whisper of mirth drowned in pity.

Uncannily, some high jabbering voices came out of the darkness: the engine-room telegraph rang "SLOW" and then "STOP," and presently we saw ahead of us a bobbing black spot—one of the ship's boats we were looking for. We hailed it from the bridge, and were answered by a torrent of Chinese. I thought, "God, this is going to be difficult. . . ." The wailing of high voices continued, almost operatic in its pattern—a slice of *Aïda*, cut thin and slipped into a twenty-foot boat in mid-Atlantic; and then, breaking through them like a soloist with a will of his own, a strong

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Welsh voice sang out: "Shut up, the whole damn lot of you."

The boat came alongside, a Welsh second-officer at the helm. Someone in it started flashing a torch, carelessly, and was stopped by a crisp order through a megaphone from the bridge. We took off twenty-two Chinese firemen—"They must have sunk a laundry," said H. to me as we counted them coming over the side—and then the boat, with revolver bullets through her planking and buoyancy tanks, was set adrift, though not before a certain number of rescuers' perquisites—oars, blocks, shackles, spare waterbreaker—had been prudently salvaged and borne aboard.

They had that round score of Chinese sleeping in the mess-decks for the rest of the trip. Said a signalman to me one morning, reflectively:

"It's funny to wake up, sir, and see all those new faces."

Valuable time is taken up in lowering a boat

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and bringing it in again, but it is often the quickest way of picking up men in the water, who may be too exhausted to climb aboard and too slippery with oil to be pulled up. I was once in charge of a boat which was sent away on this job, one dark night when a fairly high sea was running: and I remember the extraordinary difficulty we had in getting in-board men who had been in the water for nearly four hours, who were almost paralyzed with cold, and whose clothes, (and in some case their naked bodies) were so saturated with fuel-oil that it was like trying to land enormous greasy fish with one's bare hands. A short steep swell, that seemed to lift us up and flick us about like a chip of wood, didn't make things any easier.

This particular lot were lucky in having life-jackets with lights attached to them: otherwise we would never have seen them from the bridge in the first place. (These lights—they are small naked bulbs clipped to the life-jacket and connected to a battery in the breast-pocket—have been the salvation of countless men,

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and the lack of them must have been the death of countless more: a man in the water at night is almost impossible to see, and his voice, even in still weather, is lost in engine and water noises.) I forget how many we collected—about thirteen, I think, including a man so badly injured that it seemed hardly worth while giving him the extra agony of being handled. . . . When we got alongside again we bundled them over the side, the boat surging with every wave so that sometimes they could step straight aboard and sometimes could not even reach the foot of the ladder: the slightly nightmare quality of the occasion was heightened by the pitch darkness, the injured man's groans, and the thunderous noise of the chain ladder against the ship's side.

Soon there remained only the bad casualty to be dealt with. "Send a stretcher down for this one," I called up to the ship, and when it was passed we strapped him in, handling him as gently as the tossing boat allowed: he seemed unconscious by the end. Then a sling

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was rigged, and they started to heave in. But as he swung in mid-air the boat rose to a huge wave and lurched against the ship's side—or where it would have been if the stretcher had not been in the way. I felt that blow in my own guts. The man screamed once, sharply: I called out to the bow-oar: "Hold her off, for Christ's sake," and to the men on the tackle: "Heave away all you know—get him clear." It was, of course, too late, and I was glad it was dark: I didn't want to catch anyone's eye just then.

But the moment could be wiped out in action.

"Coxs'n!"

"Yes, sir?"

"How many hands up there?"

"Cleared lower deck, sir."

"Very good. . . . Pass the falls." And to the hands with me in the boat, "Hook on!"

"Hook on, sir."

"Haul taut singly! . . . Hoist away!"

That was that: the best we could do.

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We once had a Negro survivor who would not strip, or let himself be warmed, or drink anything: all he wanted to do—all he *would* do—was to curl up in a ball with his head between his legs and be left to himself. We covered him up with a blanket (which he immediately drew over his head) and let him lie. Said the Coxs'n, looking down at him: "It's his religion, sir," which for some reason seemed a completely fitting explanation.

Another Negro was brought aboard dead: he was well-formed, stark naked, and already stiffening as he was hauled over the side. I put my hand out to feel his heart: the skin I touched was cold, but very smooth and well-muscled. "Waste of time, sir?" said the sick-berth attendant, giving his voice a slight note of question. "Waste of time," I repeated. "Cover him up, and let's get on with the others."

The body, lashed to the rail, made a dark smudge in the port waist all night, stirring

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when the ship rolled; now and then a patter of spray touched the sewn-up blanket. The cook, leaving his galley to bring the wardroom breakfast forrard, eyed it, retraced his steps, and came forrard by the starboard alleyway. . . . At ten o'clock, to the survivors' captain, three lascar seamen, and a small muster of hands, I read the burial service: and then at a signal to the bridge, the telegraph rang, the engines paused for a moment, and the neat weighted package went over the side.

Survivors in the mess-decks, filling every available space: asleep on the deck, on benches, against bulkheads; sitting at tables with their heads between their hands, talking, shivering, wolfing food, staring at nothing. Some of them half-naked, wrapped in blankets and makeshift shoes; some with pathetic little cardboard suitcases, hugged close; puzzled black faces, pinched yellow ones, tired bleary white masks that still muster a grin. Men half-dead, men cocky as be-damned, men suffering

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from exposure, frost bite, oil-fuel poisoning, cuts, gashes, broken limbs, men hanging to life by a wet thread. The bravest man I have yet met was a survivor, a Yorkshire seaman with a broken thigh and a fearful gash between his face. As I paused in strapping up his leg, wondering whether he could stand any more of it, he said: "Go on—I've a bit saved up yet"; and when I was unskillfully stitching his wound: "Now then, lad, none of your hem-stitching—I'm not as particular as all that." I can't remember any men who were *not* brave and patient in suffering, but he holds the record, so far.

Going forrard to attend to casualties was sometimes like stepping into a nightmare; but it was lit here and there by glimpses of the sheer nobility of man, such as could only beget confidence and pride.

Survivors in the wardroom, eating us out of house and home: their bare feet on the carpet, their odd scraps of uniform, their wet life-jackets which they do not discard—all these

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are stock properties in our theatre of war. They have a habit of dozing off in awkward attitudes, but they look up and smile when one of us comes off watch and puts his head inside the room. Often they yarn to us about their previous escapes, or produce photographs of their homes and families and hand them round: once, rather sadly, a Belgian captain talked of Leopold, and what his surrender had meant to Belgian merchant seamen then at sea. It was this captain who made us a formal speech of thanks, self-conscious but manifestly sincere, on the last night of the trip, when we had drinks all round in the wardroom and they toasted their rescuers.

People seize on odd things when the order "Abandon ship!" is given. One third-officer had left behind his note case, containing all his papers and four months' pay, but had pocketed a large shoe-horn, quite unconsciously.

When I am ashore, and hear (as I have done) one man telling another that he can get

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as much petrol as he wants, by licensing all four of his cars and only using one of them; when I see photographs of thousands of cars at a race-meeting for which a special fast train service is run; when I read a letter to a newspaper complaining that the writer has had difficulty in obtaining extra petrol for the grouse-shooting season; when I hear of *any* instance of more than the bare essential minimum of petrol being used, I think of a torpedoed tanker ablaze at sea, with all its accompanying horrors.

“That’s your extra ten gallons of petrol, sir and madam; that’s last week’s little wangle with the garage on the corner. You might remember what you’re burning, now and then: its *real* basic coupon is a corpse-strewn Atlantic.”

It cannot be denied that the loss of another corvette had its effect on our behaviour when next we ran into trouble: there was certainly a return of that reluctance to go below which I

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have mentioned before. Many of the crew slept on the upper deck or the gun-platform. Some of the officers dosed down on the bridge, and even failed to complain when they were relieved late. We took home two of her survivors, signalmen, and bloody thoughtful they looked the whole time. In fact, it was an odd, faintly unpleasant, and almost affecting reminder of their ordeal and our own hazard, to come upon them at night, as I did when I came off watch: usually they would both be standing outside the wheelhouse, sleepless, strained, silent and (I suppose) remembering. I once tried to talk to one of them on my way down, and found it impossible. Staring at the water, he was out of small-talk altogether.

Notes on a Naval Survivor, Lieutenant R.

R. was in the wheelhouse with a sub-lieutenant who was drowned. He told me that his ship, turning under half-helm, was hit on the port side, level with the boiler-room: there was a big explosion, the ship gave a tremendous

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lurch to starboard, right on to her beamends, and broke in half: both ends then started to sink, bows and stern upwards. R. climbed up till he was standing on the engine-room telegraph and when he was already under water, succeeded in opening the wheelhouse door which was by that time above his head. He held his breath and shot to the surface.

There was a lot of oil about, but not much wreckage. He found a cordite-case to hang on to, and a seaman with him got astride a mine-sweeping float. They were then picked up by us. Others saved included all the bridge-personnel, a lookout who was in the A.A. bandstand, and another lookout in the crow'snest, who waited until the mast touched the water and then swam out. A large number of the crew were in the port waist, just over the explosion, and must have been killed by it. Very few were below.

R., who had swallowed a lot of oil, came aboard suffering from what I thought was oil-fuel poisoning. He was walking about nor-

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mally (though of course feeling a bit under the weather) for at least twelve hours, but when a doctor from a destroyer came aboard to take over my three worst casualties, R. complained that he was feeling ill and was put to bed. Though he got rid of most of the oil, he became worse. The doctor diagnosed a ruptured kidney or some internal hæmmorrhage and we proceeded home at full speed.

He was in my cabin, and I spent a good deal of time with him. He asked perpetually: "How long before we get in? Can't we go any faster? How far is it now?" and it was clear that he was simply fading out, in a way very distressing to watch. He was conscious when taken ashore, but died in hospital the same night.

When he had survived so much, and had been actually walking about after his rescue, it was sad to hear that he had died after all.

We cruised slowly round the raft, looking at it through our binoculars. It seemed lifeless

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and completely derelict: a tattered piece of cloth stuck up on a pole—the first thing to catch the lookout's attention—was all that stirred in a picture utterly forlorn.

I counted, as best I could, the untidy jumble of forms that lay round the pole in the centre. "Seven, I think, sir, none of them moving."

"We'll go alongside."

When the raft was hooked on I jumped down and began turning them over, though as soon as I had touched the first one's arm I knew that it was hopeless. We were too late by many days and nights. . . . But there was something in their attitudes, not of strain but of longed-for abandon, which seemed to say that these men had not, after a time, fought against death. That was the only thing on the credit side: that whatever tortures they had experienced, they had also experienced release, and had been able to realise it.

Another time, unrelied by any compensations. Half a gale blowing, the sea very rough,

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and a raft with three survivors clinging to it. We got a line across and took two of them off, and then the line snubbed and parted. Coming as close as we could, we threw another which fell right across the raft, but the man made no effort to secure it and it was swept into the sea again. "What's the matter with him?" I asked: "We can't do anything unless he wakes up and takes a hand himself." "He's awake, all right," answered one of the rescued men, "but he can't move. Broken arm and leg. He told us to go first. He's the mate."

We tried to get alongside, but it wasn't possible in that sea; and swimming was out of the question, though there were no lack of volunteers. In the end we had to leave him. . . . As we drew away, he waved to us: not a summons, but a sort of half salute. Then he lay down again.

Ships don't always sink, no matter how big a fish they have stopped. We once brought home a torpedoed tanker with a hole like

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Elijah's cave in her side, into which the sea washed like surf into a bay. But she was well-built, and her bulkheads held. They held, in fact, for four hundred miles at three knots. On such a journey as this, you learn what patience is, and nervousness too.

It is rumoured that German submarines keep one of their torpedo-tubes packed with assorted 'wreckage'—clothing, woodwork, etc.—and when attacked discharge this in the hope of fooling the pursuit. But unless they keep a Jew or a Pole there as well, ready for discharge at the same time, I reckon our sister-corvette sunk that submarine. The human remains, collected and brought home in their refrigerator, were pronounced authentic.

6.

ONE TO THEM

SHORT ACCOUNT OF A
Seven-Day Party:

First Day. A couple of long-range reconnaissance planes showed up about midday, but as usual they would not come within range. Instead they flew round and round the convoy making sure of our course and speed, and left us about four—having no doubt prepared a reliable and detailed report, and having incidentally kept us at action-stations the whole

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afternoon. Some of the destroyers tried shots at them now and then, but it was hardly serious shooting. There was an alarm that night, probably a false one; I don't think the U-boats had picked us up previously and it takes a little time to collect the pack after it has been put on the scent.

Second Day. Aircraft came over fairly early—high-level bombers. They kept us on our toes, but didn't get nearer than a near miss. Nor did we. There was also a couple of Focke-Wulfs playing round most of the day: routine shadowing, well out of range, but damned annoying all the same. There are thought to be four or five U-boats in the vicinity. Weather rather too good to be pleasant.

Third Day. Bombed by two Junkers-88s (?—too high to be certain) in the morning. They got rather close to one errant straggler who, having resisted all previous pleading, then and there caught up and resumed his station. A U-boat attack developed at night, and some ships were sunk: we were closed-up at

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action-stations from ten o'clock till six-thirty in the morning counterattacking one contact without visible result but managing to collect some survivors. Not known how many submarines were involved: must have been two at least, judging by the conflicting reports of torpedo-tracks sighted.

Fourth Day. Unable to relax after the eventful night, as aircraft came over again on reconnaissance; but the good weather was starting to break and by nightfall it was blowing quite hard—the middle watch was, in fact, the thickest and blackest we've ever had. Coming as it did just at the right time, we bore it with a certain fortitude; and when daylight came again without any incident developing, we congratulated ourselves on having shaken the submarine off. Sometimes it happens like that.

Fifth Day. Those congratulations were too soon. We heard aircraft overhead, above cloud-level, during the morning and in the afternoon watch the weather cleared and they

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picked us up once more. One had a feeling of impotent rage against spotting aircraft which can with so little trouble put the submarines on the scent again. The convoy has fooled them, by good luck or bad weather, so that they're hunting far off the course and hourly getting farther: and then comes along a reconnaissance plane and brings them back again in half a day.

Nothing developed that night, but it was certain that they would be back before long.

Sixth Day. Bombing during the morning, shadowing most of the day; during the afternoon a couple of really grand destroyers joined the escort-group, settling down astern like Rolls-Royces ticking over. We had an idea that we would be needing them.

A quiet night, notwithstanding: one or two scares, but maybe we gave a few back.

Seventh Day. Routine shadowing most of the day, keeping us on the alert all the time; but the real climax came, as usual, at night.

It started fairly early, too: the first attack

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came at ten o'clock. We heard two explosions, and rockets went up. After carrying out the sweep ordered by the Senior Officer we saw lights on the water and altered course towards them.

Soon we came upon the usual muck drifting about—oil, dust, pieces of wood, corpses, clothing: then we heard voices shouting out of the darkness, and saw a cluster of men swimming: they were singing “Roll out the barrel” in chorus. We laughed when we heard that, and a rating in the waist called out “Good lads! We’re coming!” and the men in the water shouted back: “Three cheers for the Navy!” I think most of us aft thought it should be “Three cheers for the Merchant Navy.” We lowered a boat and collected all we could find: some of them, wounded and swimming in oil up to three hours, were already survivors from another ship, torpedoed four days before and rescued by the ship which had now itself gone down. One of them, clinging to a life-buoy, had been calling out:

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“Hurry up! I can’t hold on much longer,” as we approached, and then, over and over again in a gasping voice: “Christ, I’m done! Christ, I’m done!” When he saw us drawing away again, not knowing that we had lowered a boat, he started screaming: “Don’t go away! You bloody cowards, don’t go away!”

We collected about thirty all told, picked up our boat again and set a course for the convoy. I was working nearly two hours in the mess-decks, attending to casualties (two internal, two badly gashed in the head, five minor cuts, and some needing treatment for shock). Half-way through, H. came forrard and gave me a glass of whiskey, which I needed. At about two o’clock, when I was on the bridge again standing my watch, two more ships were hit. From one of them flames shot into the air and soon she was ablaze from end to end. Once more we went through the evolutions ordered, and once more dropped back to see if we could help the rescue-ships.

The burning oil on the water now covered

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about a square half-mile, an immense wall of flame, topped by a huge smoke-pall drifting away to leeward, which lit the sea for miles around: we closed this, looking for survivors which the others might have missed. If you want to know what tension is, or wish to gauge a captain's responsibility at such a moment, try stopping engines when silhouetted against solid flame, with an unknown number of submarines prowling round. We could see other corvettes, intent on the same job as ourselves, crossing and recrossing, black against yellow and red, and we could not help thinking: "That's the sort of target *we're* making. . . ." But we finished it at last, and quitted the effective backcloth and started off again; and then ahead of us we saw another explosion, and flames going up in the air, and then sudden darkness. Someone said, aptly but unnecessarily: "That was a quick one"; and almost immediately we got a signal to say that it had been one of the escorts, torpedoed and sunk.

I can recall the sense of shock which that

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signal brought to the bridge. Of course other ships had been sunk, but this was an escort-vessel, one of our group, manned by fellow-sailors doing the same job as us and supposedly strong enough to be immune. . . . The blended feeling of rage and depression lasted till dawn—dawn, when another ship, a straggler far away from any effective cover, was shelled by a U-boat and had to be abandoned.

This was the last casualty, and it rounded off, with originality, an eventful night and (as it turned out) an eventful seven days.

I think we were all a little sad by the time we got in. We'd been at action-stations for virtually a week on end, missing hours of sleep, eating on the bridge or the upper deck, standing-to in the cold and wet and darkness; we'd had the aircraft plaguing us continually, and the U-boats hunting, striking, losing, hunting, and striking again; we'd watched ships—too many ships—go down, and heard of our friends being killed, and seen men drowning and had

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to leave them to it; we'd grown sick of destruction, light-headed with tiredness and strain. And above all, we'd felt ineffective, even though we knew that other escorts had struck back with notable effect. There'd probably been nine submarines round us, and you can't do miracles—they had simply played hide-and-seek with the convoy, and a ripe game it was. . . . By the end, we'd had enough of it; though if it had gone on, I suppose we would have done the same.

In fact, I *know* we would. That's the main thing about a convoy: it doesn't retreat, or reform on a new line, or execute a strategic withdrawal to previously prepared positions. It sails on, having no choice and, in the last analysis, wishing none.

7.

ONE TO US

UNEXPECTEDLY, THE
U-boat surfaced about two miles ahead of us.

I don't know why she came up: perhaps we had kept her down too long, or she thought she'd try her luck at a shooting-match, or she may even not have heard us; but we didn't waste time with speculations just then. Our first shot fell short, our second was dead in line, but over, and our third ploughed the water just where she had crash-dived again.

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We dropped a pattern of depth-charges for luck, on her estimated diving-position, and then began a proper sweep.

We picked her up almost immediately, and ran in and dropped another pattern: this brought up some oil. Out on a wide turn, and in again. Once more the charges went over the side, once more, after a pause, there came that series of splitting crashes from below which told us they had well and truly done their stuff. Another run, and another still. The after-part was a scene of vast activity—firing, reloading, priming, setting. Then the awaited signal from the bridge, and down went the charges and presently the surface of the sea jumped and boiled, and the Torpedoman rubbed his hands and called out happily: "Next for shaving!"

More oil and big air bubbles: we had the measure of him now. . . . I spoke on the bridge voice-pipe to H., who said we were doing well and ordered another, rather special pattern. "I'm not sure I can manage that," I told him. "I'll have to give you the nearest size to it."

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Momentarily the Chief popped his head out of the engine-room companionway. "Isn't he sunk yet, sir?" he asked. "We're getting properly shaken up down here." One more run, one more series of thunderous cracks—and then the sea, spouting and boiling, threw up what we were waiting for: oil in a spreading stain, bits of wreckage, woodwork, clothing, scraps of humanity. . . . Contact failed after that, and though we waited till dusk, nothing else worth collecting made its appearance. We had enough, in any case.

It was a dog's death, but how triumphant we felt—a triumph clinched, later that night, by a signal of congratulation from the Commander-in-Chief. And in the morning came another moment—perhaps the real moment—of the sweetness of success. We found the convoy, from which we had been detached nearly twenty-four hours before; and as soon as we were in sight the Senior Officer signalled: "Well met and well done. Steam down the centre of the convoy: they want to give you a

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big hand.” And so it was. When we came level with the head of the convoy the Commodore hoisted “Congratulations”: it was repeated by every ship, and as we steamed down the ranks each ship waved and cheered. It made up for much of the preceding winter. . . . The last ship of all, a puzzled Greek, still had his answering pendant at the dip* as we passed. “Bunting-tosser’s asleep,” said our own signalman, outraged by the occurrence; but we took the will for the deed. Even congratulations at the dip contributed to the sum total.

We’d worked a long time for that signal: steamed thousands of miles, been bored for days and weeks on end, spent scores of nights at the alert in wet and freezing darkness, sent and received thousands of signals. Over three hundred middle watches had gone to it, weeks of eye-strain, filthy weather in plenty, and God knows how many blasts from Senior Officer, from Captain (D), from Flag-Officer-in-Charge, from the heart of Whitehall. . . . Only

* Signifying “Signal flags read but not yet understood.”

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one more submarine, when it came to notching the stick, but it settled a longer score than that, for us.

Another corvette in the same group had some U-boat prisoners aboard, whom she used to exercise every day on the upper deck. H. and I examined them one morning through our binoculars as we passed close by: they looked a scruffy lot, and most of them did not move about at all, but stood in the waist, staring out at the convoy, which was an exceptionally large one. Many of them, we could see, were frowning.

"Surly bastards!" grumbled H. to me, as we watched them. "They're damned lucky to be alive."

"No, they don't look surly to me," I answered him. I indicated the convoy, forging ahead to England, as compact and as strong as ever. "I think they're surprised. In fact, probably they can hardly believe their eyes."

THE END

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